



Dependence

OUTCASTDEITY

Lifeline

It was hot. Not just beach hot, or 'shower too hot' hot, but so hot that it truly felt like the fires of hell had burst out of their underground cavern and had infiltrated his bedroom. The throbbing headache and aggravating pins and needles on the base of his feet were mere agitations: nothing compared to his fever. All he wanted was to get rid of the thick quilt that was covering him, but as the 15-year-old turned over in pain and shoved the covers off himself with a moan, they were just pulled back up with a heartfelt sigh from the man sitting next to his bed. He was tall; impressive; with short dark hair and warm brown eyes, but worry was etched deep into his features.

"Sorry son, you've got to keep them on." The man explained, trying to tackle his teenage son back under the thick covers. "I'm not doing it to be mean." His voice was rough, suggesting he hadn't spoken in a while. The boy in the bed simply moaned.

"... Yes you are." He whimpered. He probably hadn't meant it to be a whimper, but it was difficult to speak and everything came out soft and pathetic. The father sighed again; he too was having trouble stopping himself from taking away the covers, as he could see his son was in a lot of pain. However, it was common knowledge that the best way to get rid of a fever was to sweat it out. He hated that his son thought he was being cruel for the sake of it, when he was only doing it because he cared. He looked across the room as the door creaked open and his wife entered. She too had worry plastered all over her face. Their son had been ill before, but he had never been affected like this. Generally, he was a strong boy, and he very rarely complained.

Behind his wife followed a Healer from St. Mungo's; an average sized man with honey blonde hair and arms that seemed too long for his body.

His wife sat down next to him on the bay window seat, and the Healer held a steady hand to the teen's sweat covered forehead. The teen was trying to concentrate on his parents but, thanks to his fever, was failing miserably. The Healer dragged off the covers, to which the boy gave a happy, contented, little noise - as if that was all he had ever asked for in the world, and the long armed man cast a few spells over the boy's body.

Soon the heat was too much - that of the fever, and that of the spells cast over him combined and the boy gave in to the sleep that was calling him. His breaths came out shallow even then, betraying how much pain he was truly in. The Healer stroked his greying beard, brow furrowed as he swished his wand in front of him and seemed to physically read the magic that it expelled, as if results from tests. He leant down, opened the teen's mouth and took a swab of saliva on the end of his wand.

"What are you going to do?" Asked the only female in the room, standing up. Her voice was shaky with a panic that can only be found in a mother with a sick child.

"Just a quick test to see if my suspicions are correct- although I hope they aren't." The healer replied, not entirely concentrating on her question. He'd never exactly been known for his bedside manner, and probably didn't even notice that his words had greatly affected the terrified parents. He was too busy concentrating on the healing.

The lady sat back down, now even more worried than before. The Healer tested the saliva then turned to the parents and sighed. Both parents stood, knowing from the look the Healer was giving them that the next thing he said would be bad news.

"Your son has Flamouriadesis." He said softly, but was only met with blank expressions. It was

understandable, the disease was very rare. He had only heard of one other case in the UK in his medical career. "It's a disease which sends some of the cells in the body into overdrive – creating outward symptoms; such as loss of appetite and mood swings, but the worst is the fever, if left alone... Flamouriadesis literally translates to 'Ash Binding'... it would burn him from the inside."

The other two adults in the room stared at him, horrified.

"He's going to spontaneously combust!?" Asked the incredulous father, he couldn't believe it, but he was still pushed to ask: "What can we do?"

"It's not spontaneous, it hasn't reached its worst stage yet." Believe it or not, the Healer thought, looking down at the suffering teenager. Flamouriadesis was such a violent disease – once it did reach its worst stage the flames would completely consume him. "The illness will only ever lay dormant for a week at a time. Given the right potion at the right time, it's possible he could live a normal life. However, he'd need to have the potion at least once a week." He explained as evenly as he could. He almost smiled as the mother gave a heartfelt sigh of relief.

"That's not so bad." She said.

"Of course there's a potion." The father responded, a weak smile about his features. He wiped the back of his hand over his brow.

"Hmmm... but the original creator died recently, and he only taught one other person how to do it. The potion doesn't take long to create, but it's very complex." The Healer pondered. "It's possible he can do it in time to save your son, but it's going to be a close call..."

The father stood angrily.

"Then call them already!" He shouted. "He's my son."

X

James Potter sat at the feast in silence. The sorting had gone off without a hitch, and all around him there were other Gryffindor's laughing and joking, congratulating the new 1st year recruits, and catching up with friends they hadn't seen over the summer. The first of September always brought news of holiday romances and worries of exams they had to sit that year. He looked at his own friends as point and case – Sirius was animatedly telling everyone between mouthfuls of roast chicken about a muggle girl he'd had his summer fling with, and Remus was fretting over notes already.

"Oh Honey-pot, will you stop already – we've not even started lessons yet!" The Black heir laughed, punching his sandy-haired friend on the arm. Remus spared him a glance, but it was obvious that the assault had barely been noticeable in terms of any physical pain it may have caused.

"We have OWLS this year, in case you cared." He replied, a little tetchy. James watched him shovel peas into his mouth, and felt his stomach lurch at the idea. His own plate was pretty full – he'd been pushing his carrots and asparagus around half-heartedly since it had magically appeared in front of him, and he knew from experience it was likely to stay being pushed about until it was magically taken away again. As he pondered on how hungry he hadn't been feeling yesterday he felt a cool, soft hand on his shoulder, and turned to see who it was.

"Oh, hey Lily." He grinned, hand instinctively coming up to run through his hair. In front of him stood the tall, slim, red-headed perfection that was Lily Evans. "Have you come to your senses and

want to tell me how you're desperately in love with me?" He asked. He heard a brief snort behind him at his advances, and resolved later to find out which marauder thought he was funny.

"Really clever Potter." Lily replied, placing a hand on her hip delicately. "If it wasn't for the fact that out of the two Gryffindor prefects I'm apparently the only one with some sense of responsibility – I wouldn't be here at all."

Remus looked up from his books. He had a habit of getting too engrossed in them and forgetting he had other arrangements.

"Did I miss something?" He asked. Lily rolled her eyes.

"You were supposed to be at the front of the train on the journey here so we could be filled in on our duties!" She replied heatedly. Remus grimaced.

"I'm sorry Lils," He fretted, "I hadn't seen these guys all summer and I've been a little under the weather." He attempted to excuse himself.

Lily frowned.

"You are quite an ill person... just make sure it doesn't happen again, you'll have to help pick the password with me in a minute. Jeez, I don't know what Dumbledore was thinking, giving prefect duties to anyone in this stupid little gang." She muttered, then she remembered she was over there for a reason: "Potter, you're wanted in Dumbledore's office after the feast is over."

And with that, the red head walked away.

"Hell Prongs, what could the old coot want with you already?" Pete asked, watching her retreating back. James shrugged in response, but Peter smirked. "Well, maybe he's suspicious – you have been unusually well behaved."

James let the others finish the rest of their feast whilst he sat in relative quiet. He could feel a pool of heat settling at the bottom of his stomach. He'd not been right all week – he'd barely had an appetite and his mood was all over the place. Sometimes he wanted to dive into the lake near his home in a bout of spontaneity, and other times the mere suggestion of him going outside by one of his parents was enough for him to ill wish them. Barely a week ago he had been toned – the type of physique one would expect from a Quidditch Chaser – but now he'd lost so much weight from not eating, and he felt physically weak.

He trudged up to the stone gargoyles outside the headmaster's office in thought of his recent mood swings, so that it wasn't until the last second that he realised he had no idea of the password. It was of course a mundane point as the gargoyles sprung aside at the sight of him – as if they'd been expecting his arrival. He knocked heavily on the door, and when he was ushered in he was met with Dumbledore sat behind his desk, and none other than Severus Snape.

Severus Snape; with his lanky hair, large nose, pale skin and all, was looking just as bored as James was confused. It seemed Snape knew why he was here, which only served to aggravate James more. He couldn't help but notice the headmaster surveying them both through his half-moon spectacles. James couldn't tell whether he was amused or deadly serious, but the familiar twinkle was there, and that calmed his nerves somewhat. Snape was looking anywhere but at James, but the fiery pool at the pit of the Chaser's stomach was dancing about, making James feel queasy and on edge in the Slytherin's presence.

"You may or may not be aware, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore began, "But you came very close to

death this Friday just passed."

James looked at his feet. He remembered being really hot, and he remembered passing out, just after a Healer came. His parents had been wooly on the details, and he hadn't thought to ask. Later, when he had thought to ask he was too busy being angry at the world to bite his tongue and request the information. His memories of the entire event were hazy at best and he would rather not think of a time when he had been pathetically claimed by an illness. He glanced towards Snape – did they really have to discuss this in front of Snivellus? He didn't want the dungeon bat having any material to pester him with.

Dumbledore nodded his head solemnly.

"The illness you suffered from is called Flamouriadeses, but is often referred to as Cinis for short... and it will return, if you do not drink a specific potion..." He stopped, glancing at Snape. "I mean Elixir - once a week, on a Friday at eight pm, as that is when you took your first."

James furrowed his brow.

"But I didn't..." He started, but Dumbledore interrupted – knowing his unsaid words.

"Yes you did- you just don't remember."

James chewed on this inside of his cheek thoughtfully, suddenly wishing he could remember more, or had been bothered to find out more from his parents. Dumbledore had just told his enemy that he was suffering from memory loss, and with his new weakened state he didn't revel in the idea of Snape knowing he was ill. After all, it would be the perfect time for the Slytherin to take revenge if he knew James was weak and couldn't fight back.

"And where do I get this potion from?" He muttered.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled a little more dangerously, so naturally James grew more suspicious. It was impossible to spend as much time in the Headmaster's office as the marauders did without getting to know how to read Dumbledore. Something interesting was about to happen.

"It's called the 'The Glacier Elixir' and Severus is the only person alive who can brew it successfully." Was the old man's response, with an almost proud wave of his wrinkled hand in Snape's direction.

James' eyes went wide and he glanced at the lanky haired boy again, who was examining Fawkes with a polite interest, and decidedly looking nowhere near James.

"I'd rather be sick for the rest of my life then depend on that greasy bat." He mumbled spitefully. Snape turned his head, looking over his shoulder to give him a bored look, as if he found James to be an overreacting child.

"I am afraid you don't understand James." carried on Dumbledore, ignoring the teens comment, and Severus' patronizing stare. "If you don't take the potion, every week, then there is no way you would survive past next Friday."

The headmaster looked way too serious for that to be some kind of elaborate joke. James gulped. He didn't want to believe his life was on the line, but the gravity of the situation was catching up with him. He hadn't even considered dying until he had great-grandchildren.

"You mean my life is in his hands?" he asked, jerking a thumb at Snape, who was still observing Fawkes. Dumbledore nodded somberly, and James was already mapping out his will in his mind.

Snape had probably been waiting for a chance like this, the greasy teenager was only there to watch James die – preferably screaming in agony and begging to be saved. James resolved then and there not to give him the satisfaction. However, Severus chose that moment to finally speak.

"I'll make the Elixir for you to drink each Friday."

James' head snapped up and his jaw fell down, which was a painful combination he reminded himself not to try again.

"Excuse me?" He all but choked out.

"I'll make it." Severus confirmed, "Of course, that is, if you can pay me."

James looked at the floor, whatever price Severus named he probably wouldn't be able to afford it. He felt the heat in the bottom of his stomach climb up and start licking painfully at his ribs. He could hardly rely on his parents for financial support; they were struggling to build back up the Potter Empire that had fallen thanks to his grandfather's gambling problem. He highly doubted the two galleons and fourteen sickles he had in his pocket were going to cut it.

"I don't have any money." He admitted, unable to stop the defensive tone that slipped through in his voice.

"Actually, I was thinking something a little bit different from money." Was the Slytherin's reply, in a cool, amused tone. Snape smirked at him – a cruel twitch of the lips that should have been ugly, but somehow wasn't.

James' heart skipped a beat.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know what type of payment Snape was trying to suggest. If this had been a private conversation he might have just jinxed the potion out of the other teen, or at least landed a decent punch – but Dumbledore was watching them closely. The heat in James' stomach rose a little further, and seemed to pierce his lungs with a sharp pinch. He thought for a moment he might be able to use his little knowledge of the unforgivable curses and land an Imperio on Snape, but Snape was still smirking, and for a moment, James only felt afraid.

"One order a day. Whatever I chose to be your task for the day, you must do to the best of your ability. In return I'll make the Elixir for you each week." Snape negotiated calmly, taking some form of sick amusement in the internal struggle that was so obviously going on inside the Gryffindor.

"Orders?" James asked quietly, shifting from foot to foot nervously. He was wary of the idea of being controlled by the Slytherin. What would the orders be like? "What do you get out of it?" he carried on, mumbling as he cast distrustful eyes towards the other teen.

"Watching you humiliate yourself." Severus replied without a blink; triumphantly. James attempted to glare at him, but he didn't feel as confident as he hoped he looked. He took a slow deep breath in an attempt to calm himself down.

"Seven orders for one potion?" he asked, trying to sound indignant and confident.

"No." Came the reply "Seven orders for your life."

The messy haired Quidditch player looked to the headmaster for some help.

"Can't you do something about this?" he asked, but Dumbledore shook his head ruefully. James

didn't miss he too was sending suspicious glances towards the Slytherin.

"As bad as it sounds when said out loud, your life has nothing to do with the school, unless you are killed by something directly related to Hogwarts, like another student." He stated. "It effectively means that your death, and any arrangements to do with it, we have no control over. Cinis doesn't come under our jurisdiction. The deal is between you and Mr. Snape, and therefore the matter of payment should be sorted out between the two of you."

James growled gently in his throat; he was angry beyond belief at the headmaster's statements, but more than anything he was worried about what Snape might do. He directed his next question to the boy who seemed to now have complete control over his life.

"If I agree to this" He started carefully, "You can't really force me to do anything, can you?" He asked, hating himself for the insecurity that had slipped into his tone.

Snape raised an eyebrow, suddenly thinking about what type of 'anything' James might be referring to. He wrinkled his nose when unbidden images of forcing Potter into indecent acts ran wild in his head, unwanted and not asked for. Did the Gryffindor honestly think he was sick enough to enjoy something like that? It suddenly struck him that James might be genuinely scared about what things he might be forced to do; and that thought amused Severus greatly. He had no desire to calm the boy who had bullied him for so many years, and opted instead for an ambiguous answer. After all, Potter deserved to be uncomfortable for a little while.

"That depends on whether you care about your life or not. You don't do the order; I don't make the Elixir."

The heat that had started in James stomach and had made its way into his ribs and lungs finally found its way into his heart, and seemed to push up, physically expelling itself through his throat in a vomit of angry words.

"It's my LIFE you disgusting bat, how the fuck can you play with someone's life like that? You're no more than scum!"

Snape's eyes darkened and a scowl took over his features. He hadn't wanted to lose his façade of cool, calm and collected, but the Potter heir just made him so angry. Even being in the same room as the boy made him want to instinctively send curses and jinxes in the messy haired boy's direction. James didn't even have to speak – as soon as he caught sight of the brat's birds-nest that he called hair, Severus was an uncontrollable mass of rage. How dare Potter accuse him of taking the matter of someone's life lightly, when he and his little marauder friends had been the ones to destroy his?

"You and your little marauder buddies have made my life a living hell since I came to Hogwarts. Do you seriously believe I actually care whether you live or die?" He shouted back. He pulled the boy forwards by the collar of his robes threateningly, unheeding the cough of protest from Dumbledore. The next thing he said was a whisper, directly into James face, making sure to pronounce every word so that the Gryffindor's face was sprayed with little bits of saliva as he talked. "To me, this is nothing but a business deal, do you understand?"

James gulped again, and nodded. Snape didn't miss him trying to stop himself from shivering. James was definitely scared, but then again, who wouldn't be if their life was in danger? He gripped a little tighter when Potter didn't verbally respond, until the Gryffindor – courage obviously failing him – averted his eyes and mumbled that he did.

"W-What if you forget to give me an order?" He asked quietly, not daring to look up. Severus

roughly let go of his captive and watched as James stumbled to right his balance.

"I won't. I may choose not to, but I won't forget." He spoke calmly, running a hand through his own hair in a very James like fashion. It was greasy again, thanks to the fumes from the potions he had been working on. "If I choose not to then that's my decision and you'll still get your potion." He added, spitting out the word potion as if it pained him to say it. James had no doubt he'd only swapped from his careful choice of saying 'Elixir' because 'Potion' was easier to say in an intimidating way. James also couldn't deny that it had worked.

The Gryffindor nodded again as Severus left the room as if the matter was closed. In James' mind the matter was not closed – it was very far from closed – but he had no wish to anger the Slytherin further, especially knowing that Severus had his life hanging on a thread. He turned to leave as well, but stopped at Dumbledore's next words.

"Don't test him Mr. Potter, and please try to get your deal written down on paper. Make this official."

James gave a nervous laugh.

"He wouldn't actually let me die would he?" He asked, but he knew as he said it that the snake would.

Dumbledore looked grim. "Make this official and probably not." he sighed, eyes drifting over James shoulder as if he was watching a movie that was invisible and silent to the rest of the world. "Do you remember Alex Kemp?" He asked, his voice filled with regret.

James thought about it, and then;

"That Slytherin that disappeared a few years ago?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"He also suffered from Cinis. Severus struck up a deal and began making the Elixir for him." He explained, and in that moment he looked impossibly old. "Not long after they struck up the deal Severus found out that Alex had joined Voldemort's ranks... He simply stopped making the potion."

James eyes widened, even as a shiver ran through him at the sound of His name. It was stupid he knew, but the name was cursed.

"Couldn't he get done for that?" he asked "It's basically murder!" he continued to protest. He felt a rush of understanding for the Slytherin he had never actually met. They were inexorably linked through their illness, and the fact that Severus had agreed to become their savior – even if only briefly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"The deal was never made official, therefore Severus never had to make the potion to begin with. He wasn't murdering him, he just wasn't helping him." he looked straight into James eyes, and the Gryffindor got the distinct impression he'd just had his mind read. Dumbledore would know just how scared James actually was, no matter how much he protested. "Which is why I urge you to get this down on paper. Make this official. I couldn't say anything before, while Severus was here, because the boy doesn't trust me. But any way you can, please try and get written confirmation."

James felt faintly sick. He never thought Snape would just let someone die - even if that someone

was a death eater. Besides, the way Snape acted James thought Snape would end up on You-Know-Who's side anyway. He shivered and left the room without another look back; making his way up to Gryffindor tower deep in thought. When he made it to the dormitory he saw the other marauders had waited up for him.

"So, what did the old coot want?" asked Sirius from his spot on Remus' bed, where the two were playing a game of Wizards chess that Sirius was losing badly. The Black heir looked down at his pieces, where one of Remus' knights was beating the daylights out of his castle, and let out a puff of air in dismay. "Cuddle-pops, why do you do this to me?" He asked the Werewolf. Remus simply rolled his eyes, and then all eyes were back on James.

The boy in question snapped out of his thoughts.

"Oh... he, um... he just doesn't want any more fights between us and Snivellus this year. He's really gunna be cracking down on it." He lied easily.

Sirius frowned.

"Oh, well that sucks."

"Yeah." said James, "Tell me about it."

First Order

"Jamie! Jamie! Jamie!"

"Stop calling me that! And get off me you mangy mutt!"

"Oh Jamie! I'm insulted! And you used to be such a deer!"

"STAG!... I'm a stag!"

"Looking like that you're no more of a stag than a stag beetle!"

"Not you too Wormtail! You're all ganging up on me!"

There was a cough from the right.

"Okay, so not so much Moony."

"Not so much?"

"The intention was there..."

A grin. "Never in my Wildest dreams." A pause. "Beetle boy."

"URGH! It's just a bad hair day!" James cried indignantly, glaring at his so called friends, but only being rewarded for his efforts with a self-satisfied smirk from Sirius Black, his long-time partner in crime, and the boy he thought of as the brother he never had. James frowned slightly when he realized that smirk was very similar to that of Severus Snape's, which he'd had the displeasure of seeing the night before. Today, classes had started and life was going on as normal – and James could only console himself by thinking that Sirius wore the expression much better than the Slytherin.

"Come on, we're going to be late." Interrupted Remus, and the four boys turned into their Herbology class to be confronted with a sneaky looking third year who was hurrying out of the greenhouses. She gave them a piercing glare.

"What's all this about stags?" she asked, pouting her lips. They were already made up with far too much lip-gloss, and she was pulling a pen out from the tight blonde curls of her hair as she spoke.

"I am a stag." James said with a cheeky grin and a wink.

"No, you're a beetle." Remus corrected. James screwed up his nose.

"You leave me alone!" he mocked, "You'll scared away little red riding hood with all your talk of beetles. You big bad wolf you!"

"There's nothing wrong with beetles." objected the third year. Pete rose an eyebrow at her

comically.

"Whatever Rita, get to class." he brushed her off. Rita was always known to be snooping around, and the shorter boy had no desire for her to find out about their nighttime prowling. She was such a gossip that the whole school would know by the next morning. Rita hurried past, with a flick of her hair; earning her a wink from Sirius. It was not as if Rita was special, just another name on his list of conquests – nevertheless, James shook his head exasperatedly.

"Third years Siri?"

Sirius Grinned. "On occasion."

"... Man-whore."

"Jealous."

Once she was actually out of eye and ear range, Remus whacked James round the side of the head – perhaps with a little more force than was strictly necessary. The bespectacled boy tripped to the side, surprised at himself. He knew Remus had a lot of strength (a werewolf perk), but he also knew he'd been physically weaker since his near-death encounter at the end of the holidays, and little bouts of intense heat often caught him off guard. He had put it down to puberty or something equally embarrassing, but the more he thought about it the more he realized it had only been since last Friday. His balance was constantly in a mess. With the development that he was going to continue to be ill he had to wonder if these symptoms of his disease would continue to grow worse. He didn't want to have any more interactions with Snape, but since the Slytherin was a self-proclaimed expert on the subject of Cinis, he wondered if he could ask the boy in the symptoms were normal.

"Don't use muggle nursery rhymes to refer to me!" Remus scolded lightly, under his breath, explaining his assault. Sirius gave James a grin.

"Yes dear," he stressed. "You'll hurt Mr. Big Bad Wolf's feelings!"

Needless to say, the marauders were enjoying their new found freedom of being animagi.

They entered the greenhouse and James took a seat across from one of the Ravenclaws they shared this lesson with. He was a little on edge as today was the day he was supposed to get his first 'order' from Snape. He had figured it would come with the morning mail, but the mail came and there was no command; although he did get a letter from his mother which ordered him not to do anything 'drastic' this year. He wouldn't call charming all the suits of armour in the castle to pelt things at Filch and his damned cat whenever he walked by 'drastic', would you? On the contrary, he'd call it 'necessary'. He let out a small snort at this thought, even as it was overshadowed by the developments of the night before. He was trying not to think about how the snake held James' life in his slimy hands; but the constant reminder that Snape was completely and irrevocably in control was difficult to waive. He'd hardly slept the night before for thinking about the types of things Snape might make him do in their little 'deal' – and when he did sleep he'd had nightmares about the Slytherin dangling the antidote just out of his reach and watching him writhe in pain. He had no doubt the snake would revel in watching him burn.

The boy eventually broke out of his worried train of thought to see Sirius staring at him.

"Huh?" he asked, wondering if he had missed a question.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "What's up mate? You've been acting out of it since you woke up!" He

explained.

James tried to force a grin.

"Just thinking of how we should extract our revenge on Filch." He said. It was the truth, if only half of it.

Sirius hummed low in his throat and closed his eyes in a vision of bliss; obviously thinking of his own revenge on the stingy caretaker. The thought was pretty happy. James was happy to whisper their plots under his breath with the boy, but at that moment he spotted an owl at the window, trying to find the best route in.

It fluttered into the classroom just as Professor Sprout was taking a register, through a high window James hadn't even realized was open. It dropped a letter in front of him and it landed in the compost of his Chinese Chomping Cabbages. His breath caught in his throat – there was no address on the envelope, but James knew it was from the dungeon bat. What if it ordered him to do something unspeakable? What if his suspicions of the last night were correct and he was forced into something unsavory? James knew the lanky haired boy would derive great pleasure from watching James humiliate himself – what if that translated to something... sexual?

"Andrew Ch- James Potter what are you doing NOW?"

He jumped a mile at Sprout's shout, and scrunched up the letter in his hand. He gave his best charming smile. Sprout's eyebrows shot into her flyaway hair. He tried to focus on her, but his thoughts were almost solely focused on the envelope he'd instinctively hidden behind his back.

"A Love note perhaps?" she asked, glancing at his hidden hands. James felt his cheeks go from normal colour, to bright red, to deathly pale, to a faint green. The rest of the marauders burst out laughing, much to his chagrin.

"It's... It's like..." Sirius started, but only subsided into more laughter when he was unable to think of the word for the muggle contraption he was thinking of.

"Traffic lights?" Supplied Peter, trying to clear up what his friend saying, in the middle of giggles himself. Sirius nodded. James stuck the note in his back pocket and stuck his tongue out childishly. His friends could be so... immature at times. They all could. He could hardly blame them though, as he'd already decided not to tell them the situation he was in. It was too mortifying.

"Yeah whatever," he mumbled. "You guys are just jealous 'cuz you never get love notes." he sneered. He felt the pool of heat at the base of his stomach, which was beginning to become familiar, begin its usual dance. He was... angry, despite all reason.

"You're right," Replied Remus, "we went past that stage in 2nd year." Sirius, who was still laughing slightly, nodded in agreement to his friend's comment. Eventually, Professor Sprout called for order.

Despite his worrying, it was lunch before he was able to open the letter without interruption. He glared at the words on the page.

Make a love potion. Present at 7PM tonight. The OWLS potions classroom.

It wasn't addressed, it wasn't signed, and it wasn't sugar coated. A clear, precise order. James didn't know what else he had been expecting, but even so he gave his eyes a roll to feel more in control. He regretted it almost immediately, however, when the action made him dizzy and he wasn't able to focus for a moment.

"You alright mate?" Remus asked, putting a firm hand under his elbow to steady him. James breathed deeply before replying.

"Yeah... I've just got to get some stuff done." He replied vaguely, standing up from the long tables in the great hall and quickly exiting, note in hand. He missed the rest of the marauders give each other a brief, confused look. He was too busy depicting his order to notice.

What did Snape want a love potion for? Sure, they called him Snivellus for a reason, but Snape was good at potions - very good. Why would he need James to make it? The answer was simple – he wouldn't, not if he had any intention of using it. James was sure it was just a chance to laugh it up at James' awful brewing attempts. He sighed at the fact that even though he knew this was just a chance to humiliate him, he would end up skipping lunch to complete the order. He bit his lip, angry at himself for so easily bending to the other man's will, but reasoned that it was very unlikely he would have eaten anything anyway. His stomach rumbled as if hungry, but he couldn't face the thought of actually eating.

He made his way down to the dungeons in a hope that no one was there, and when he arrived he was in luck. Being the first day back, even those studious NEWT students didn't have the motivation to give up their lunch times. He dragged out his potions book from the bottom of his bag and stowed into Slughorn's stash to get the ingredients needed. He set up a cauldron and got to work.

After twenty minutes of work, and having kept adding ingredients to a bubbling cauldron, and watching the colour turn from a sickly green to a more sickly pink - a Barbie pink, he was beginning to get frustrated with the whole thing. James had a feeling it was supposed to be a little darker, but added the Ashwinder eggs like nothing was wrong. It wasn't like he was going to drink it anyway. He grimaced as his already pathetic excuse for a love potion turned yellow, and fell back to the old favorite of stirring it a lot and hoping for the best. He left it to simmer, but when the bell rang he was forced to put some in a container and clear up the rest. Yellow or not, he had tried his best, and that was all that mattered. He hoped. It was all Snape had asked for in the deal, but he still had to make the deal official. He nestled the small container, enough for one person to get a real kick, into his bag, and scurried from the dungeons – hoping he'd still have time to meet up and walk with his friends on the way to class.

He attended classes in the afternoon as always. He tried to mess about with his friends, laugh at the other marauders jokes and play up for his teachers, but the more he thought about the potion nestled at the bottom of his bag, the more he felt himself plundering down into a pit of anger and hopelessness. Come ten to seven he was glad for the excuse to leave the other boys, of the short walk to the OWLS classroom without anybody hassling him. In the classroom where he had potions with the Slytherins, he found Snape sitting on one of the benches: one leg pulled up and an arm draped lazily over that knee. The other leg was over the side, foot firmly on the ground; a perk of being tall. The robes he wore had been discarded in the September heat and he was dressed in his school uniform shirt and dark jeans, his tie pulled lose. He looked up as James entered. James stopped in his tracks, mouth slightly open – unsure whether to go forward or not.

"Let's see it then." The Slytherin said, straight to the point. Since it was Potter, he wouldn't be surprised if he'd managed to turn it yellow or something! James seemed to shake himself out of a spell of paralysis and jogged down to the desk Severus was sat at. When he pulled out the container from his bag, filled to the top with yellow potion, Snape let out a small, quiet laugh. James blushed, even having prepared himself for the inevitable humiliation he still didn't want to be laughed at by anybody. Laughed with, yes, laughed at – he couldn't bare it.

"Did you just blush?" Severus asked at the Gryffindor's red cheeks. He'd never seen the boy show

some form of humility. James brought a hand to his hair and messed it up, then looked away, willing himself not to pout. Severus glared. "I'm not a girl, that gesture isn't attractive. It's annoying." He scolded. James furrowed his brow, biting his lip, and played with the hem of his sleeves – subconsciously he knew all of these were nervous habits. He had never been nervous around Snape before this whole ordeal had started.

James coughed, deciding to tread lightly, his life was on the line here. "Sorry," he mumbled, annoyed even having to say it. "I know I suck at making potions. I did try!" He added, scuffing his shoe against the desk.

Snape's lips curled themselves into that annoyingly attractive smirk that made the pool of heat at the base of James' stomach flick nauseatingly.

"Alright, I accept it." He said, after a pause. James nodded, placing the container down on the desk. Snape snatched it up and placed it into his bag, standing from his position on the desk, as he looked up he saw James take a barely distinguishable step backwards at the action. Severus coughed, looking agitated. "Are you... feeling okay?"

James took another step backwards at the question. He couldn't tell if Snape was being sincere, or if this was a farce and he was about to be laughed out of the room. Honestly, he felt hot, bothered and physically weak. He wanted to crawl into bed and sleep for the next couple of years or so. He'd felt as such since he'd been making that potion on the Slytherin's orders.

"Fine." He lied, but even as he said so a sudden wave of dizziness overtook him and stumbled into a desk. He held a hand to head and groaned. "Is this normal?"

Severus seemed to consider the question. He was half tempted to simply ignore the obviously suffering boy, but James had swallowed his pride and asked the question, so – never to be outdone – he could be civil enough to answer.

"Your body will be physically weaker having contracted the illness. You will often suffer heat waves, dizziness, and shortness of breath – headaches in extreme cases." He paused, wondering whether to tell him that potion fumes from incomplete potions were known to have a detrimental effect on recovery from Flamouriades. He'd asked the boy to make the potion as a simple and sadistic form of making the Gryffindor suffer, but he knew prolonged exposure to the fumes might be fatal, so he couldn't use the same revenge again – not if he planned on making the Chaser realize agony before he died.

James nodded to the explanation, and Severus could tell he was itching to leave his presence. What was he waiting for, permission? He stilled as he realized that was exactly what the so called brave Gryffindor was waiting for. James truly feared for his life, and the manipulation Severus was creating might work in an even more productive way than he had ever hoped for. He paused for a moment, reveling in the fact that his company was so obviously uncomfortable, and yet was not leaving, before waving his hand in dismissal.

"Get out." He ordered gutturally. James all but fled from the classroom, not stopping to slow for breath or thought until he was stood outside the fat lady's portrait. He looked up at her and she smiled reassuringly – he always found her calming.

"Hello dear." she said sweetly,

"I'm a stag." James grumbled back, "quack"

"No dear, 'quack' is the noise a duck makes."

James sighed out a little laugh, feeling his heat pool begin to subside - he did enjoy the plump lady's humour.

"So what noise does a stag make, that can be the new password!" he said excitedly, the portrait looked stumped.

"I don't know dear." James' spirits fell again and he visibly deflated.

"Stag." He mumbled, "QUACK! Now let me in!"

The portrait swung open with a huff from the plump lady, and James climbed through the hole. He spotted the marauders in the usual spot by the fire. Remus waved him over.

"Where've you been?" he asked. James shrugged in what he hoped was a nonchalant way. Peter smirked.

"Probably meeting with his girlfriend." He supplied.

"What girlfriend?"

"You know Pads, the one who sent him the love letter."

"Oh yeah." Sirius smirked, eyes twinkling as he looked up at his best friend. "The girlfriend."

James felt the familiar lick in his stomach, annoyance at all the speculation.

"That wasn't a love letter and I don't have a girlfriend." He admitted dejectedly.

"Then what was it? It certainly looked like a love letter." asked Moony.

"Just because it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, doesn't mean it's a duck." was James' cryptic answer, it was something his mother said a lot and thanks for his run in with the plump lady he had ducks on the mind. Besides, there was no way he could tell them about Cinis, or Snape, or the deal... it was all so embarrassing, and he wanted to be able to spend time with the marauders without constantly being reminded that he was walking the line between dying and slavery.

"What type of logic is that?" asked Padfoot, scoffing.

"Yeah, if it looks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, then it's a god-damn duck!" added Moony tetchily. He knew exactly what James was getting at, and since it had been the marauders who had convinced him that animal noises make the best passwords he was not going to have his password mocked.

"What else could it be?" asked Wormtail.

James mused for a tiny moment, on ducks and the order he'd received in Herbology and the yellow love potion and how Snape's smirk wasn't ugly.

"It could be a stag."

Lover

When James woke the next morning, it was to an owl pecking persistently at his forehead. He waved it off with a lazy flop of his arm, twitching his eyes open at the unwanted attention, but it kept coming back to peck at him, apparently very intent on making sure he received whatever it was trying to deliver. He faintly wondered if he might get a bruise there as he tried to dislodge the gunk from his eyes that had accumulated during sleep. None of the Marauders kept animals anymore, under the fear they might try and eat Wormtail (who had a habit of changing into a rat when he was asleep), but James was sure if he still had his beautiful Tawney owl Amita, she would never have abused him just to deliver a letter. He gave the large Brown an inquisitive look, and it impatiently pecked at the package it had dropped on the end of his bed.

James looked for a label but came up short. He already knew who it was from though. He sighed, thinking about how Snape had the authority to do whatever he pleased, and how he was dreading finding out what this might be. He shooed away the bird out of the window, shutting it after it had flown out, and decided to open his parcel in the bathroom, just in case it was something embarrassing. Pete was a light sleeper and he didn't want to wake the boy with something he didn't know if he could explain. So he sat on the floor of the small shower room connected to their dorm that all the boys fought over in the mornings when trying to get ready for school, and unwrapped the parcel; only to be greeted with his own bright yellow love potion. Snape had left a note inside. It didn't mess about with pleasantries.

Drink it.

James sighed at the blatant order, shifting uncomfortably on the cold tiles. A pang of anger swept over his heart, and he had to focus on his breathing to calm himself. He cursed at himself for even considering it, because drinking the potion could come with many side effects. One wrong ingredient and a simple sleeping potion could give someone boiled warts – and he'd managed to turn his love potion yellow. However, it was drink up or face death, so he tipped the container back and chugged it down his throat.

The first thing he noticed was the delighted sensation that swept over him, as if the potion had lifted him off his feet and given him a new lease of life. He cracked a smile into the mirror over the sink and kicked the container into the wicker basket bin there. He twiddled with his hair for a bit and checked his skin over for unwanted pimples – once he was completely satisfied with his look he took a shower and let the warm water rush over him. He felt... happy, satisfied, relaxed. No unwanted side effects, no sudden need to serenade McGonagall – maybe the potion had just been null and void and Snape had wasted his order for the day. He quickly relieved himself and brushed his teeth, grinning into the mirror. Damn, was it just him or did he look fine today? I mean, sure, he could do with gaining a few pounds (he wasn't entirely sure being able to see each individual rib was healthy), and he had some bags under his eyes where he wasn't getting decent sleep (he kept waking up with nightmares), but he'd perfected his cheeky smile, and all the outdoor work he'd done in the summer had given him a sun-kissed glow.

He finally felt like he could face the day without worrying.

So, when he entered the dorm again to see Sirius sat up in bed, yawning and stretching his arms above his head, a contented expression on his striking features – the sudden urge to leap into his arms and confess his undying love for him, was completely unexpected. And, as all really, really manly men do in that situation – he blushed from head to toe, letting out a high-pitched squeak.

"You alright Prongs? You got a fever?" asked the half-asleep Sirius croakily, Peter, always the

lightest sleeper, woke up at the sound of a voice – raspy though it was.

"I..." James was looking directly at Sirius, his partner in crime, brother in all but blood. "I love-" he clamped a hand over his mouth and squeaked again, fighting the urge to curl up in the other boys four poster and cuddle his friend. Remus awoke at the high pitched noise, he sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"wha'?" he groggily asked, having never been great in the mornings. He hated being awoken and was always the last one out of bed, leaving just enough time to get everything he needed to do done before classes. Everyone had their downsides, and Remus' was his inability for function properly in the mornings without large amounts of coffee.

"I just love..." Replied James, the answer came out muffled, but more or less understandable.

"You what Prongs?" asked Sirius, raising an eyebrow, trying not be amused by his friend's obvious discomfort. All of a sudden James couldn't help but notice how his eyebrows were perfectly shaped, how his cheekbones were incredibly defined, and how his lips were the most tempting thing he'd ever laid eyes on. So instead of leaning over and doing something awkward like... smelling him or something, James chose instead to launch himself at their resident werewolf, landing in the unsuspecting boys lap.

"Moony!" He cried.

"Wh-What!?" squawked the werewolf, now much more awake, eyes wide and staring at the Chaser.

"What am I going to do!?" whined James, burying his nose in Remus' chest. Remus patted his head awkwardly, glancing around at his friends for help.

"Well... um... What's wrong?" He tried. James wasn't like this, he was used to Sirius being childish and attention seeking (really, it's what the Black heir did best), but James was the Quidditch player – the sporty, too-cool-for-school type. He would never be seen dead nuzzling a friend, and if he had ever needed comfort on anything, it had never before come from the other marauders. Remus had always assumed James just didn't have problems, that or he had an excellent relationship with his parents and could talk over everything with them.

James stopped nuzzling Remus' chest and sat up in his lap, giving the blonde boy a rosy, determined look. He took a deep gulp before even attempting speech, and Remus used the opportunity to casually shift his legs so that James wouldn't feel the awkwardness that was morning.

"I'm... I think..." he paused, "I'm in love with Sirius Orion Black!" he all but screamed. There was a shocked silence throughout the room, until Sirius burst out laughing.

"I knew I was irresistible!" he shouted playfully, pumping a fist in the air and falling back in to the bed sheets. "Don't worry Prongsie - I love you too!" He laughed good-naturedly. He was always up for a little play flirting with his friends. When they found out Remus was playing for the other team (an awkward moment when they'd walked in on the werewolf sucking face with Freddy Prescott in a supplies cupboard) at the end of third year, Sirius had been constantly worried that Remus might find him attractive, and it might ruin their friendship - when Remus had told him he would rather date the giant squid Sirius had started up play flirting to tease him about his attempts to keep his sexuality a secret. As such, more often than not Remus was on the receiving end of Sirius' flirting, but if James was feeling left out, there was more than enough fake-love to go around.

"Y- you do?" Asked James.

Sirius suddenly stopped laughing at the hopeful tone.

"Well, you're not serious are you?" he asked.

James glared, and ignored the 'no you are' joke which slipped into his thoughts. As it always does whenever anyone asked that question in front of the Son of Black. He knew it was an old joke, but it still managed to catch him off guard every now and again and entice a laugh.

"Of course I am!" he exclaimed blindly, "I didn't realize it before now, but you are my one true love!" he added, and having done so he pushed himself off Remus (who mumbled at not being a cushion) and sat down next to Sirius, linking their arms and staring at the slightly taller boy intently.

Sirius suddenly became a lot soberer.

"Okay, Jokes over." He sighed. He knew it was unfair, but he could only continue flirting so long as he knew it was a joke. The actual idea of a relationship between anyone in their group of friends, completely disregarding the fact that they were all male, was simply ridiculous and made him twitch. He and James were practically brothers.

"No joke!" James replied, running a hand through his hair nervously.

Sirius stood up, leaving James on the bed once he'd dislodged the other boy from his arm and quickly got changed. He left for breakfast without so much as a goodbye, a steeled expression on his features. The Black heir might have been over reacting but he had to let James know he was uncomfortable with this joke – he'd made it perfectly clear to Moony when he was worried the boy might actually be interested in him, so now he needed to do the same with James. Sometimes ignoring the boy was the only way to get things through to the Quidditch player's head.

He sighed on his way out of the Gryffindor common room. Was this actually a thing? Was James confessing he was gay? Somehow it had seemed inevitable with Moony; that first time they'd caught him making out with a dude everything had fallen into place – the utter lack of interest in girls when the rest of the marauders were finding out that boobs were just as warm and smooth as they looked, and the way he could make old robes, tattered shoes and too-big trousers look like something out of vogue magazine. Yet, James had been riding along on the straight train since station one – they'd had plenty a conversation about Wendy Bones' legs or Celeste Selwyn's cleavage. And then there was Lily to think about! No, it was impossible he just woke up this morning and decided he was batting for the other team now. He felt... lonely. He tried not to get too grossed out about the idea of Remus being into guys because that was his choice and it didn't really affect Sirius... but if James was gay too, it was different. James was his brother in arms, and if he really was gay, and had feelings for Sirius, then things would be awkward. They might not come back from it, and their friendship would be over.

-X-

The next time Sirius and James saw each other was at the beginning of their muggle studies class. Sirius had arrived early thanks to eating breakfast early, and had been sat at the back of the class watching the Hufflepuff's they share the class with trickle in. Most of the class was Hufflepuff's, seeing as they were the only ones who cared about muggles enough to actually take the class. When James arrived, he made a bee-line for the available seat next to Sirius and gave him the biggest grin he could.

"You feeling better now?" asked the Black.

"I always feel better when I'm with you!" was the reply. James felt a little silly for saying something so cheesy but he wasn't lying, whenever Sirius and James were together he did feel better, and there was a fluttering in his heart that was pleasant, unlike the usual licks of anger and hatred he was become accustomed to feeling recently. Peter sat down on Sirius' other side and the dark haired boy instantly engaged the mousy haired boy in a frolicking conversation about apple pie. The subject matter was a clear indicator that he'd gone back to ignoring James. Remus sat down on James' other side and James turned to the werewolf, frowning angrily.

"Oh Remy! He's ignoring me! I only took this class because of him!" He sniffed. He wasn't actually crying, but he felt it added to the dramatic effect.

Remus patted his head again, awkwardly. He didn't know when he'd become James' comforter, guiding him through his little bout of insanity he seemed to be having that morning, but he wondered if there was any way he could get out of it. He wasn't very good at comforting people.

"Now, now," he said instead, "I'm sure that's not true..."

"Yes it is!" James wailed loudly. Remus gave a nervous chuckle to the now staring Hufflepuffs and thanked Merlin that their teacher wasn't present as of yet. "I couldn't care less about muggles, but Padfoot's so obsessed with that damn bike of his!" James explained, and Remus found himself humming in agreement. He knew James' reasoning was flawed at best, but it was so much easier to just agree with the boy when he had an idea in his head – especially if it was before ten in the morning.

"I suppose we did take this class because of him..." he mumbled.

"AND NOW HE'S IGNORING ME!"

Remus gave a sympathetic nod, and sent a pleading look at Sirius. Surely if they just talked this out he could go back to ignoring the world until the coffee started working its magic.

"I'd talk to him if he stopped spouting nonsense!" Padfoot reasoned, James only 'tsked' loudly, but Remus didn't miss him sending appreciative glances the Black heir's way. Was James actually... until that point Remus had assumed this was an elaborate prank, but perhaps James actually had feelings for Sirius.

"He can't help his feelings for you!" He heard himself saying. Heck, he knew a lot about repressed feelings. Unlike James he didn't want anyone outside of the Marauders to know about his sexual preferences (if he'd been more careful he wouldn't have wanted anyone in the marauders to know).

"He doesn't have any feelings for me!"

"Yes I do!"

"No you don't!"

"Yes he does!"

"Boys!"

The three boys gulped and looked up at the Muggle Studies teacher, all with identical looks of innocence plastered on their faces that they'd perfected after years of experience. Peter whacked his forehead with his palm, having been making gestures with his arms in an attempt to warn his

friends that class was beginning and they were making far too much noise.

"Anything you'd like to share with the class?" Challenged Professor Jed.

James grinned. "I'm in love with Sirius!" He told them all, even though he blushed at the thought of everyone knowing. Why shouldn't everyone know, he reasoned, his feelings were pure.

The class erupted into giggles that made a now very red Sirius sink lower into his seat, and James frown, trying not to lose his confidence.

"I'm not joking." he said to the laughing class. Professor Jed decided to carry on with his lesson, regretting his decision to ask. Of course James had something to share, the boy loved to share.

- X -

And so, after cleverly deducing that blindly confessing his love on a regular basis was not Sirius' idea of fun, James decided that he needed to seduce Sirius to win the taller boys affection. That being said, James wasn't entirely sure how to go about 'wooing' a male. Not wanting to be too dependent on Remus, who had shown him only love and support ever since this whole ordeal had started, he asked Pete. However, this idea drew a complete blank when an enraged Wormtail told him to 'ask a girl for God's sake!' - apparently he hadn't any experience on the matter either. Hence the reason why James was sat crossed-legged on the Gryffindor common room floor, waiting for an answer from a very confused looking Lily Evans.

"... How to get a guy to fall in love with you?" she clarified, "What guy?" what guy? What guy had possibly been able to win James' love, who was a known womaniser? James looked away, suddenly reluctant to say. Lily, after all, had been the object of his affections for some time now, and the sudden switch from her to Sirius was as confusing as it was exhilarating. He felt a little lick of something hot at the base of his stomach, and put it down to light arousal at the idea of Sirius. Lily, feeling sympathetic, sat down next to him. She would never have done it if she felt his affections were still focused on her, and suddenly had the stray thought that this was all an elaborate heist to get her to like him more, and possible agree to date him. After all, there were plenty of cases of supposedly 'gay' best friends getting together with the woman they'd been after all along.

She couldn't exactly see James going to such lengths though – he didn't have the patience.

"What's he like?" She asked, when it was obvious she wasn't going to get an answer to her previous question.

James shrugged, trying to act nonchalant, and refusing to look the girl in the eyes.

"Stubborn, funny I guess. He's... energetic. He likes... fast things."

Lily's eyes lit up.

"Merlin James, you love Sirius Black?" she deduced, it was hardly a difficult mystery, but all the same James' eyebrow twitched with a bit of annoyance.

"Is it that obvious?" He asked. Lily tried to stop her lips from curling into a grin. It was a little funny. Half the female population of the school (the half that weren't drooling over them) had bets on when Sirius and James would do the dirty.

"It's just a little... inevitable. Anyway, I would complement him - a lot." She advised, "and laugh at his jokes too, and... perhaps ask him for help with studying. He needs to feel important."

James frowned, sighing. He had hoped Lily would be little more helpful – she was a girl after all.

"But I already do all those things!" He complained. She was right though; Sirius did like to feel important. Lily shrugged.

"Well, I dunno then." She shot back. "It's not like I've put much thought into how to seduce Sirius."

James stood up, giving into his earlier notions. He gave Lily a nod of gratitude, before:

"I guess there's no other option then, I'll have to ask Moony!"

And if Lily thought it was weird that Remus was James' next port of call on how to seduce the son of Black, she had the good grace not to mention it as James sped from the room.

-X-

He was halfway down the Charms corridor when he bumped into Snape (literally), who was talking to Sirius' younger brother, Regulus. James steadied himself, wondering when his body had become so physically weak as to be knocked by a bump with another student, and tried to shake off the uneasy feeling he felt when about the Slytherin. He knew deep down there was something important about Snape he should be worried about, but he was too focused on finding a way to seduce Sirius to care. He let his eyes travel between the two Slytherins, lingering on Snape for a moment too long to be casual, but coming to rest, ultimately, on the younger Black sibling. Perhaps he would know some secret ways to woo his older brother.

"Reggie!" he enveloped the unsuspecting third year into a rough, one-armed hug. The Slytherin only spluttered and tried to push the older boy away. He had never been particularly friendly with Sirius' dorm mates, and he wasn't one to readily accept physical attention. He didn't need to waste his efforts, however, as James was pulled away – a heavy, angry yank on his shoulder ripping the two apart.

"Just because I rejected you does not mean you get to go after my brother faggot!" scolded a severely pissed off Sirius. Pretty much all the girls (and half the boys) in school knew that you didn't try and date Regulus without Sirius' consent. The boy was just a little overprotective, and although the two didn't spend that much physical time together you could bet your bottom galleon that if you put the moves on Regulus, Sirius would find out about it and curse you into the next week for the audacity of trying to date a Black. At his brother's shout Regulus rose a well-practised eyebrow at the insinuation, but other than that showed no outward reaction to the scene. James, on the other hand, seemed upset that Sirius would even think he had intentions anything less than moral towards the thirteen year old Slytherin.

"I wasn't trying to hook up with him. I wanted advice on how to get you to agree to hook up with me..." James mumbled.

The other boy in the scene, Severus, smirked; an expression that was becoming a normality on his face. So, the love potion had made James infatuated with Sirius Black? And it was working quite well by the looks of things, despite the colour and obviously mediocre brewing skills. He watched, highly amused, as the two Gryffindor's began to argue.

"Don't involve people that have nothing to do with it!" Black snarled.

"He's your brother!" James retorted.

"Precisely! Now will you let this charade go? Please?"

The smile, evil though it was, was slowly growing on Severus' face. If all went well Potter would be publicly humiliated and his and Black's friendship would fail. Sirius was obviously angry and a crowd was already beginning to form because of all the shouting. Yes, the love potion had worked a treat. Not only had he managed to physically harm the Gryffindor whose life he was now in control of, but he would be able to emotionally harm him as well.

"James Harold Potter! Just stop!" Shouted Sirius, but by now James was almost in actual tears. The boy clenched his fists at his sides, but Severus could see he was resisting reaching out to touch the boy he was artificially infatuated with.

"No, I won't!" He shouted back, grabbing both of Sirius' hands before the boy could protest. "Jeez Siri, I love you!" He exclaimed, and with that, he crashed their lips together. The crowd gasped and Severus made a mental note that yellow possibly created better results than pink – although he was loathe to admit Potter had made something anything more than substandard, it was obvious the boy had made a very powerful love potion. Unless of course he was spurred on by real feelings, but Severus doubted very much that was the case. James was a lot of things, and one of those things was most definitely a womanizer. It was common knowledge that James and Sirius thought of each other as brothers; nothing more and nothing less. Although the female population sometimes let this slip their minds when they gossiped, many of them having been scorned by the troublemakers.

Sirius broke away from the kiss and grabbed James' wrists, squeezing hard, to stop him from trying anything like that again. He glared down at the shorter boy, a snarl on his otherwise attractive features.

"I'm not interested." he spat, something bitter in his words. "Now stop." and with that, he walked away, leaving a crowd and a very disgruntled looking James. The other Gryffindor quickly dried his eyes on the sleeve of his robes, unable to believe he was actually crying over what had just happened. With the kiss, and inevitable rejection, the love potion had lost effect and he had come to his senses. His memories had returned to him too, and he sought out Snape in the crowd, trying to stop himself from becoming too embarrassed by the stares he was receiving from the crowd that had gathered. He glared the best he could with watery eyes, knowing that Snape held his life on the line so he was unable to shout curses, or even explain the feeling of pure hate that he felt for the boy at that moment.

Something fiery stirred inside him, something strong and full of anger, hurt and hate. It felt like a part of him, but like it didn't really belong where it had nestled itself. It felt like an infection running through him, and making him dirty, but something inside him reveled in it.

Cinix was making itself known again, and it was that which stopped him punching that aggravatingly attractive smirk right off the Slytherin's face. Snape probably knew as well, that the destructive disease was eating away at him from the inside, devouring his emotions while the Elixir stopped it from getting to his physical body. He couldn't help but feel that hate was taking over, and he'd rather still be under the effects of that stupid yellow love potion.

Friendship

James was pacing. He'd been pacing for about twenty minutes now, and since Remus' eyes had been following him for about nineteen of those minutes, the werewolf was getting relatively agitated, and an agitated werewolf is rarely a good thing. He could already feel the beginning of a headache coming on. Peter had long since given up on James' irrational behaviour and had left after the sixth time James had tried to tell them why he and Sirius were no longer on speaking terms. Granted, the two other marauders could take a very educated guess as to why their two friends were not talking, but they refused to help their friends unless they actually confessed the whole story. There was two reasons for this, one: they wanted James and Sirius to trust them, and two: they loved hearing gossip.

"Okay Moony, this is what hap-"

"Whoa, hold up!" Remus interrupted. "Wormtail, he's gunna do it!"

Peter came crashing into the room and plopped himself down on his four poster bed, looking excited that James was actually going to tell them what happened. The girls he had left down stairs, if disappointed, came second to James swallowing his pride and telling the truth. The messy haired chaser looked between his two friends sighed.

"I can't do it!"

"URGH!" cried the other two boys, both falling back onto their respective beds.

"What the hell is so hard about it?" asked Remus after a moment silence of looking at the ceiling with narrowed eyes. Judging by the small shuffling noises, he assumed James had gone back to pacing.

"It's difficult to explain..." He mumbled, and he may have been about to go on, and try his very best to explain, but the door swung open. Remus sat up to see and very pissed off looking Sirius enter the room. The door slammed shut behind him and he gave James the Black family death glare, which was rumored to, for a moment, send you straight to Hell and let you feel the lick of its flames. If Sirius had resorted to this particular technique, then things were undoubted morbid. James took a step backwards. Unfortunately, because of how he was pacing, that meant he stepped against Pete's bed, falling backwards onto the four poster, and on top of the rat animagus.

"Nice one." commented the boy underneath him gruffly. He shoved James off him and they sat side by side on Peter's bed, James examining how pissed off he'd made Sirius, and Peter rubbing his legs where James had landed unceremoniously.

"Do you know how many people asked me if I really was gay with James Potter on the way up here?" asked Sirius in an indignant tone, staring James straight in the eye. James shook his head, maintaining the eye-contact, but it was obvious he wanted nothing more than to break their little staring contest and speak to his shoes instead. "You wouldn't, because you've been hollowed up in

here, too afraid to god-damn leave the place haven't you!?" Sirius carried on, angry beyond belief. He had a reputation to uphold after all, and he'd thought James had a similar reputation, but evidently the stag didn't hold his in such high regard.

James opened his mouth to protest, but Sirius was still in raving mode, and not much really got through when the Black was ranting.

"You're such a freaking idiot Potter, I don't know what the hell came over you, but what on earth possessed you to kiss me in front of all of those people!?" He asked, although it was probably rhetorical. Remus and Peter exchanged glances, they knew it would be something to do with James' declarations of love, but had the messy haired boy really gone as far as to kiss Sirius? "Your Jokes are usually funny Potter, but most of us know where to draw the line, when I said I wasn't comfortable, I wasn't comfortable! Why couldn't you get that? And stop saying it's not a joke, because it has to be, because I don't want to risk our friendship over something so fucking stupid!" Sirius went on, he looked... deflated when he was finished.

James looked down, ashamed. He'd be lying if he said it was a joke, yet it wasn't like he really was in love with Sirius. All of this was Snape's fault. He pouted, but he hoped that the other marauders couldn't see his childish actions. He knew he'd acted really childish while he'd been under the influence of the love potion, but he wasn't under the influence anymore, so he should stop acting like such a fool. He wished he could tell them about his deal with Snape, but he'd already decided not to. Not only did he not want to deal with the worry that he knew he'd get it if he told them he was terminally ill, he also didn't want to tell them he was having to depend on someone for help. Especially not when that someone was Snape, their sworn enemy. He couldn't see a way out of the situation.

"I..." any excuses he may have come up with only ever reached his throat, then they were swallowed back down before he could use them.

"You're such a fucking idiot James." was the comment Sirius left them with, he grabbed his summer hat, even though James knew he'd never actually wear it, and had probably only used it as an excuse to come in and shout at the Chaser, and left. James turned over and buried his head in Peter's sheets.

"DAMN IT, DAMN IT, DAMN IT!" he screamed. Peter gave a low whistle at the actions, rolling his eyes.

"Look James, ya screwed up, but if you just told him you were messing around with love potions he'd totally get it." He assured.

James looked up, incredulity in his eyes.

"What was that Wormtail?"

"Well, I saw the remains of the potion in the bathroom. I know your embarrassed, since you managed to turn it YELLOW and all-" James blushed lightly - "And Yeah, who wants to get caught making a love potion-" the blush grew- "but I doubt your sucking at potions is really worth losing your friendship with Pads over."

There was a brief moment of contemplation, then James stood up, clapped Peter on the back thankfully, and left after his brother in all but blood. Remus smirked, not unkindly, after his retreating back. He turned to the only other boy left in the room.

"Your sentence structure is abysmal, but I'm proud. That was very well handled."

Peter smirked back.

"Whatever Rem, I know you're disappointed that James isn't actually gardening uphill, if you get what I'm saying."

If Remus was disappointed he handled it well, opting instead to just shake his head and roll his eyes. Love potions, he thought, typical marauder behavior.

- X -

James headed down the Charms corridor feeling strangely reminiscent, and still very annoyed at a certain greasy haired Slytherin. He couldn't help the fantasies that were popping up about cursing Snape, or just going for it the Muggle way and punching the twat – but it only served to upset him more when he remembered that they could be nothing more than fantasies. On the other hand, Pete had given him the perfect excuse, because when he told Sirius that he'd been messing around with love potions, and had actually drank it to see the effects, he wouldn't be lying - that's exactly what he had been doing, he'd just leave out that part that Snape had told him to do all that. He'd say he hadn't told him before because he'd been embarrassed, and that was also the truth, he was embarrassed to tell Sirius that he'd drank a love potion. He generally hated lying if he could help it – especially to the Marauders, but he didn't mind bending the truth a little here and there or adding a bit of creative license if the situation called for it. He ran down the hallway and grabbed Lily as she passed.

"Hey, have you seen Sirius?"

"Not since you guys went at it in the hallway." was her reply, a teasing smirk already on her lips. James smacked his forehead.

"Let's not talk about that. Thanks anyway." He mumbled.

Armed with the fact that no one was likely to let him live this down, James didn't ask anyone else for help, and relied on his eyes to do the Sirius searching from then on. This method seemed to work however, when he entered the library to see Sirius sat at one of the desks, engrossed in a book.

Something about that sentence was very wrong, he told himself, but nevertheless, made his way over and pulled up a chair next to his friend, or possibly ex-friend, suddenly nervous.

"Hey," he said, to announce his presence. Sirius spared him a glance and went back to reading his book, or at least, he looked like he was reading, in reality he was just staring at the page, trying to ignore James. James sighed gently and pulled the offending pages away, to be met with a heated glare. "Yeah. Glare all you want, as long as you're looking at me and not a book. That seriously hurts my feelings; you hate reading."

"Yeah?" Snapped Sirius, "well right now I hate you more."

"Ouch." James smiled, some confidence coming back to him. "Look, do you want to know why I was acting like such a dork?" He asked.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Well, duh." – Not eloquent, but appropriate.

"I drank a love potion. Which, by the way, I made myself. I was trying to make one, and wanted to see if I had it right. You were the first person I saw after drinking it and I guess I ended up 'falling in love' with you." he explained, messing up his hair, as an attempt to still look his old self.

"A love potion? You were trying to make a love potion? Why? And why didn't you tell me that before?" Asked his best friend, looking at the table where his book had been, still not entirely happy with looking at James. As far as he was concerned it was still his fault that the whole school was laughing at him. James blushed.

"Well... I just sort of was, I didn't want to tell you 'cuz..." he paused and took a deep breath. "I was embarrassed. I didn't want to confess that I'd been trying to make one in the first place... it's kind of redundant now."

Sirius grinned at the table. "So... I'll forgive you if you tell me who you were gunna give it to?" suggested the taller boy. James blushed some more, but then he got an idea.

"Snape." he said, grinning, and not lying, since he had made the potion to give to the git. Sirius choked on air and gave James an incredulous look.

"SNAPE?" he questioned loudly, earning some disgruntled looks from some of the other library occupants. James quickly hushed him, not liking the stares they were attracting.

"Yes Snape. I was planning on giving it to him as a joke. But the thing turned... yellow." he laughed nervously, embarrassed by his terrible potion making skills. "And then I figure I should try it out, otherwise the plan could backfire. But then... it just backfired even worse." he trailed off, looking to Sirius for a reaction to the story, lots of that had been made up, but he had to have some 'creative licence' if he was going to be able to keep Sirius' friendship. Sirius was still looking at the table.

"You're such a prat Potter!" Sirius grumbled. James winced, so he wasn't forgiven, so much for Pete's master plan, he'd thought it'd been a good idea. "You should have told us if that was the plan. We could've helped. And you don't have to be embarrassed about your potion making, we already know your crap." The taller boy carried on. James bit his lip, trying to stop the grin from taking over his features, and failing miserably.

"So... I'm forgiven?" he asked.

"Yeah. Just don't try anything so stupid again." Was the reply.

James caught him in a hug, a rare occurrence, since for all their teasing and playfulness, neither boy was overly touchy-feely. It was accepted this time, since their friendship was worth the embarrassment of being caught acting girly. Sirius hugged back, very lightly.

"Get a room!" called a voice from the doorway, a smart mouthed Ravenclaw who had witnessed the incident in the Charms corridor and just couldn't resist the temptation. Sirius shot him a glare over James' shoulder and clutched the boy a lot tighter, so that James was unable move away. This didn't exactly stop the boy from trying, as he wanted to see the harassing student too, and was a little uncomfortable in the taller boy's bear-hug. Sirius, however, just teasingly smirked at the Ravenclaw and his friends, and bit on James' ear with his sharp teeth, causing the smaller boy to jolt – his ear instantly going red from the assault.

"Padfoot!" He scolded, shocked.

"Get a LIFE!" The Black heir shouted back, still not letting James go. The Ravenclaw, looking slightly put out, left the library, and then Sirius let James go. James rubbed his ear and looked at Sirius with a bright flush spread over his cheeks and nose. A natural reaction, really. Sirius grinned cheekily.

"Think about it as payback for that kiss earlier."

James just nodded. He gave Sirius back his book and turned to leave, but was stopped by a fourth year Hufflepuff, whom he was certain he probably should know the name of, but evidently didn't.

"Erm, James?" she asked cutely, he spared her a smile and waved for her to continue. "Well, that is... um... you and Sirius... um..."

Sirius came up behind James and pulled the Hufflepuff into a lip bruising kiss. James looked away, not really interested in watching his friend make out with some chick.

"That answer your question?" asked Sirius once the two had broken apart, he stepped up on one of the tables and smiled around at the audience in the library. "I'd just like to clarify that James and I are not in any form of sexual relationship. I still like girls (can't vouch for Jamie though)"

"Hey!" objected James.

"And if you would spread that word around please? 'Cuz I'm beginning to get a bit annoyed at all the questions." he asked politely, James shook his head and tugged on his hand.

"C'mon Casanova." he said, dragging the boy back up to Gryffindor, they still had to tell Remus and Pete that they were talking again anyway. Of course, he was a little careful not to keep their hands linked for too long, he'd keep a little more distance than he usually did from his best friend for a couple of days, until it all died down. He grinned, as he passed Snape in the corridor, who was looking annoyed that his master plan had failed and James and Sirius were still friends. He wondered what he would have done if he and Sirius had really fallen out – he wasn't sure he could survive not having his best friend about.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts – stop being such a teenager, he told himself, pulling Sirius along by the boy's sleeve. Sirius was still his best friend, so he had no reason to entertain thoughts like that. All he had to focus on now was surviving whatever Snape had in store for him for the rest of his life.

Couldn't be too hard.

Infatuated

James blinked open his eyes and lay on his back, looking up at the hangings over his four-poster bed for a moment. His limbs felt heavy, although he supposed he should have felt glad that he still had all his limbs after successfully completing two orders from his sworn enemy. Today was Friday. It was Snape's turn to hold his end of the deal, and James wasn't entirely sure he was going to, since like Dumbledore had said, nothing was in paper. He had an odd ringing in his ears, and he couldn't even attempt to drag himself from the covers, but more worrying than anything – he felt intensely hot. His heart skipped a beat at the connotations of that – were they sure he was supposed to take the Elixir in the evening?

As he continued to ponder this, a large black dog pounced its way on to his bed, turned itself into a human with a sickening distortion of its bones that made James feel awfully faint, and grinned.

"C'mon Jamie! Wake up!" Said Sirius loudly. James just held a hand to his head, trying to will the headache to go away. A familiar flick in his stomach made him furrow his brow. Sirius was being overly insensitive today – was it not obvious he was ill? Sirius turned back into Padfoot and licked James' face all over, which earned him an annoyed moan. He shoved the dog off of him and convinced his body to turn over, away from the source of the noise. He frowned at his pillow.

"Leave me alone." He bit, his tone cold.

"You're going to be late!" Replied Sirius in a sing-song voice, deciding to ignore his friend's grumpiness.

"Since when have you cared about punctuality?" James asked back, mumbling more into his pillow.

"What in Merlin's name is punctuality?"

James turned over again so he could see the dog animagus, and sniffed. His head hurt, his legs ached and his eyes were swimming. His back had begun to ache and he felt sluggish all over. How could Sirius not see he was so obviously ill? If he actually had the energy, he thought, he might just reach out and punch the boy – or was that the disease talking?

"Go away." he tried, and Sirius shut up, but didn't leave his spot on the end of James' bed. James tried again; "Go away or I'll tell Remus about your collection of werewolf porn."

He decided that should shock him a little, but Sirius only gave a bark of laughter that went straight through James and made him let out a pathetic little whimpering sound.

"I'm sure he'd be flattered." Sirius replied, trying to figure out where 'werewolf porn' had come from. Was there even such a thing? Not that he cared or anything. He glanced at the still sleeping werewolf, sort of glad he slept like a log. Even if it was outlandish and stupid, he wouldn't put it past Remus, in his usual early morning daze, to actually believe their resident Quidditch player.

"No, he'd be pissed. He's say something like 'that's derogatory'."

"Do you even know what derogatory means?"

Both boys jumped at the sound of Remus' voice; rough and gravelly from just waking up. Sirius averted his eyes; so he hadn't been asleep. James shrugged, he really only had a faint idea, but he'd heard Remus use the word enough times to know it would sound like something the sandy haired

boy would say. Remus sighed.

"It's beyond derogatory, it's disgusting. You don't really have a collection, do you?"

Sirius almost blushed. Almost.

"Of course not! Do I look like I'm in to that kind of stuff?" He all but yelled. Peter walked into the room at that moment – he, of course, had been up for over an hour. He had his school bag slung over one shoulder and had obviously heard their conversation, because the next thing he said was:

"I have always wondered about your need to call Moony those infuriating nicknames."

The rat animagus smirked at the room's occupants, his eyes coming to rest on James, who had yet to entice himself out of bed, and was staring blankly into space.

"Prongs?" he tested gingerly; all the marauders knew that James had been tetchy since term began, and Pete would rather keep his head down if the Chaser was in one of his moods. James just groaned, turning over again yet again (because Merlin if he could actually get comfortable). The heat was beginning to creep up his chest and over his neck – was this the end? Was Snape going to let him die then and there, in the dormitory? On the plus side, that thought had been chilling enough. Remus crossed the room and did a forehead to forehead temperature check.

"You're a little warm, you want to go see Madam Pomfrey?" He asked kindly, James shook his head, but moaned when an owl began tapping at the window. He didn't want to deal with one of Snape's prissy orders at that moment. Unfortunately, Pete let the owl in, a surprised look on his face – most of the post did come with breakfast after all. He checked the parcel it had been carrying and then flapped it back out again.

"It's for you." He said, handing over the package. James grabbed it, and hugged it close, not wanting to open it, but not wanting anyone else to open it either. "Oh! It came with a letter. Here, you're feeling down, I'll open it for you." Peter went on.

James tried to protest, but Pete had already opened it and was reading out loud.

"This is just a pain killer, come down for eight."

James ignored the looks he was getting from his friends and ripped open the parcel, if it was a pain killer then he was definitely going to drink it. He couldn't believe his luck that Snape was being so nice – and the odd thought did cross his mind that Snape might have actually sent him poison – but this was quickly crushed by reasoning that the Slytherin had no reason to kill him directly: he could simply wait until that evening and watch him burn. He tilted the container to his lips, but Remus grabbed his wrist and forced it back down as if it was no effort at all, before he was able to drink any.

"Don't be an idiot, that note wasn't even signed. It could be anything." The werewolf protested.

James sighed, and decided to explain as best he could without giving away to his friends that he was chronically ill and relying on his worst enemy for help.

"Don't worry. I... I know who sent it." He sighed, before gulping down the contents. It was disgusting, but his pain was instantly relieved. He gave a happy sigh. Remus, on the other hand, looked sceptical.

"Well, who is it?" he asked. James stood from the bed, reveling in how fast the pain killer had worked; a smile on his lips before he could stop it. He bit his lip when he looked at his friends.

"It's no one important..." James replied. He wished he could say that Snape was not important truthfully, but if he wanted to stay alive then really the Slytherin was the most important person in his life. He suddenly found himself pinned to a nearby wall by Remus' brute strength, a small quirk which came with turning into a werewolf every full moon.

"I'm getting really pissed off with all your cryptic answers." He growled threateningly, almost animalistic. Remus wasn't exactly known for losing his temper, but when he did it tended to be scary: something about turning into a blood-thirsty beast that could easily rip out your entrails with his hands, tended to worry some people. James bit his lip.

"It's not any of your business." He snapped back, a little angry because Remus was holding too tightly to the T-shirt he had decided to wear to bed to cover up just how skinny he had recently become, making it difficult to breathe, and thus think.

"We're supposed to be friends!"

James frowned at the floor, still pinned to the wall by one hand as if it was no effort for Remus to do it at all. It was a few more moments before Sirius took action and dragged Remus off the smaller boy. The dog-animagus grinned heartily at the pair, although it was obviously fake.

"Look. Let's all just calm down a bit here." He said, hands out in front of him, as if trying to tame an animal – which in a sense he was. "James is just embarrassed because he doesn't want us knowing he's got a girlfriend. But it's fairly obvious he has." He explained, winking at James and patting Remus on the shoulder. James gave him a confused look. He honestly had no idea what the boy was talking about, but was grateful not to be pinned anymore. He straightened his T-shirt. Sirius continued on: "Me 'n' Pete figured it out. James is getting loads of owls and shit right? That love note the other day for example. He probably just woke up, sent her an owl to tell her he was feeling like crap and couldn't make their little date tonight, and she didn't like that, so she sent him a pain killing potion and reminded him to come see her for eight o'clock."

James had to admit, that wasn't terrible logic; it was bad logic, held together by far too much supposition, but it wasn't entirely terrible. He shuddered at the mere idea of Snape being compared to one of his girlfriends and looked away. Remus, however, nodded. He was basically dead to the world before he managed to get caffeine in his system, and was able to be convinced by anything in that state.

"Oh, I see." He said, and with that he got changed and left. Sirius quickly dragged some clothes on, whilst Peter hung back to inspect something in his school bag, and once James was dressed too, the three of them left the room together.

"You know Prongsie," Padfoot said as they made their way down the spiral staircase. "Pete and I know that the girlfriend theory is bullshit. We can tell when you're lying to us, but we're not going to pry. You've probably got your reasons. I wish you'd just trust us a little more." he said, his voice growing lower as they met up with Remus. James gave a weak smile.

"I do trust you" he replied, "but I also trust myself." He knew it was another cryptic answer, but he really meant it. He trusted himself to be able to judge his friends' characters, and he knew they'd be worried, and he didn't want that. Not just because he would feel guilty for making his friends worry, but also because he wasn't sure if he would be able to deal with them all freaking out over it. It was bad enough he had to act like an obedient little puppy for Snape; he didn't want to have to change how he acted around his friends as well. Best scenario was the marauders never found out the situation he was in, and then he got the time with his friends to just relax and goof about. As it was, the disease was causing a strain on their friendship. He wasn't telling them, and that was final.

Peter smiled.

"You know Prongs, if your secret is that you're actually meeting a dude and that's why you don't want to tell us, you know it's not a problem. You and Moony can be poofers together." He half explained, half laughed as Remus shushed him and James reverently shook his head. James knew Pete had already got the thought in his head and wasn't going to leave it alone though. Suddenly, Wormtail's eyes widened and he coughed. "Wait, was that pinned to the wall thing sexual tension? Are you and Moony fucking?" He asked in a slightly panicked voice.

James and Remus paled as Peter said that last sentence. He'd said it much louder than he had probably originally intended, and unfortunately just as they passed a bunch of Hufflepuff girls. The girls instantly erupted into giggles, sending the Marauders searching glances. James could see the rumors already formulating in their minds. Remus was glaring at their fourth friend.

"Is it impossible for you to have a little more discretion?" He asked. Sirius clapped him on the back.

"Don't worry sugar-bun," he assured, "you freaking out about it is only going to fuel the rumors more. Take it in your stride."

James was also glaring at the shortest member of their group, annoyance evident on his face.

"Thanks Worm..." he mumbled. "Even if I was gay I wouldn't dare try it out with Moony." He added.

Sirius furrowed his brow.

"What's wrong with my honey-pot?" He defended jokingly. James just rolled his eyes. He was already lost in thought about the pain killer he'd received. He'd have to find a way to say thank you to Snape without actually saying thank you. Perhaps it would score him brownie points with the Slytherin, so that he wouldn't have to be so terrified of the boy murdering him at any moment.

- X -

Potions came way too quickly for James, who hadn't thought of a way to thank Snape without actually thanking him. He could hardly just say it in front of the entire class – everyone knew of the animosity between Severus Snape and the Marauders. It also came too fast for Remus, for whom this was his worst subject, but that was a whole different matter. Both boys trudged into the dungeon classroom with dejected looks on their faces, Sirius following behind looking like he couldn't care, and Pete in front, who was excited, since he excelled at brewing. For most of the pranks they thought up that happened to include potions, he and Remus worked on them together. For when Remus said he was bad at a subject, that generally meant he was levelling Exceeds Expectations, as opposed to Outstanding.

Upon entering they noticed the class was already crowded around Slughorn's desk, most of the girls leaning forward and chatting animatedly, and so they joined the crowd and were hastily shoved around by a bunch of girls in their excitement. James found himself easily pushed aside, having to be steadied by strong, calloused hands. He felt stupid, being a Chaser for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and general ladies' man of Hogwarts, he shouldn't have been shoved about so easily. Cinis must have been sending his balance off again. He'd not touched his breakfast again that day, opting instead to push about his cornflakes and anxiously fret over how to confront Snape.

His heart skipped a beat, mainly in fear, when he looked up to see the boy who had steadied him so easily, and with no reward in it for them, was none other than his victim-turned-saviour.

"Alright Class." announced Slughorn, a huge grin on his face, "Today we'll be learning about a particularly strong love potion."

There was a pause in his speech in which Sirius erupted in to laughter, stifled as best he could to the point where it sounded more like giggles. They earned him strange looks from around the class and a particularly venomous glare from James – who knew the only reason Sirius found this funny was because the last time James had tried to make a love potion he had turned it yellow. Slughorn was good enough to shrug off the immature behavior (that's what he gets for teaching secondary school, he tells himself) and carried on. "The love potion smells strongly of whatever the victim may desire, so... who wants to volunteer to describe what they smell?" He said, a jolly smile on his round, red face.

Snape tapped on James' foot with his own. "I order you to volunteer." he said under his breath. James was struck by how deep and husky his voice sounded when used in that way. It was strange, but not unpleasant, and only served to make the Quidditch player highly confused. He wondered whether the potion fumes were getting to him, but stuck his hand in the air nonetheless. The Marauders gave a happy cheer at James' willingness to put himself forward, and Slughorn ushered him up, smiling at one of his favorite students. It wasn't that James was good at potions; simply that he was athletic and good-looking and Slughorn thought he would go far in the world. A good connection to have at any rate. James stepped towards the cauldron and sniffed, feeling foolish for making such an obvious attempt to smell the scents, when he'd been able to smell the faint tresses of it from where he'd been standing before.

"I guess... cinnamon, burning wood, coffee and..." he coughed slightly, feeling a bit hot under the collar. He usually wouldn't care if he admitted the next thing or not, but after the incident in the charms corridor that everyone had seen, and the little gem Wormtail had shouted out that morning, then his next confession would be more embarrassing than usual. There had been a lot of evidence, false or otherwise, piled against him in the last few days to suggest he might be batting for the other team, and he didn't want to fuel rumors even more – but he'd already hinted he had something more to say and Snape would be pissed if he didn't do the order properly. He sighed. "And Sirius' shampoo."

The class broke into fits of laughter (including Sirius himself, who had already been on the receiving end of James smelling his hair in the mornings when he wasn't quite paying attention to what, exactly, he was doing). Slughorn smiled at the confession, sending him away with a flourish of his hands, and began to talk about the properties of the potion and give the class tips on how to successfully brew it. James made his way back to Snape's side – much to the confusion of his friends, who were a few steps away. He told himself it was because there was a space there, and not because he wanted to engage the Slytherin in conversation – and hear that voice again.

Surely, some remains of that love-potion must be making him go crazy, because he could think of no other reason he would willingly spend time with the greasy-haired boy.

"That was a waste of an order." he whispered when he got there, "everyone already knows I like that stuff."

"Black's shampoo as well? Did he know that?" Severus replied, voice low to avoid being caught out by Slughorn, and only serving to make James' heart beat a little faster. The Gryffindor honestly had no idea what was happening to him. There was no way he actually found anything about the boy standing next to him attractive – but he could hardly deny that tone of voice was pleasant to the ear.

He brought a hand up to his hair instinctively, trying to remain composed, then remembered Snape

hated him doing it, and lowered it back to his side. "Yeah he did, he's known for a couple of years now. I won't let him buy anything else." He supplied. He didn't know why he was trying to keep this conversation going.

Snape smirked though, and it was evil, but not ugly. "Why don't you just use it instead?"

"It wouldn't smell the same on me"

"That makes no sense, it'll still smell the same." Snape frowned at him. "It doesn't matter who uses it, it's manufactured the same way."

"I wouldn't expect you to know much about shampoo." Said James scathingly, before he could stop himself, irrationally angry at Snape not understanding why he couldn't use the shampoo. As soon as the words left his mouth, however, he clamped his hand over it as if he could push the remark back in. He turned his eyes to Snape, wide and worried, but the Slytherin hadn't seemed to notice the slip.

"It's always going to smell the same, no matter who it's on, you just think it smells better on Black because you think fondly of him and therefore associate nice things with him."

James blinked a few times, he couldn't fault the boy's logic after all. He couldn't quite believe the most civil thing the two boys had ever said to each other was about shampoo. The sudden thought of what Snape would smell like if he used that shampoo, and the image that it conjured of the Slytherin lathering himself up in the shower – body on full show – was not appreciated. He quickly averted his eyes just in case Snape was actually a master of legilimancy.

"Potter! Snape!" called Slughorn, "Glad you're getting along so well, because you're partners for today!" He snapped, obviously annoyed that his lecture had not been listened to. James quickly looked around the room; Remus was partnered with Peter, and Sirius with Lily. They gave him a confused, and also pitying look, before getting their ingredients and starting work on their potions. James moaned, but only quietly, for fear of angering the boy next to him.

"Sir, please don't make me work with him!" Snape said, possibly so James didn't have to. He nudged James with his elbow, and the Gryffindor took it as all the permission he needed to keep up appearances.

"I can't believe I'm agreeing with him, but I second that notion."

"Well that's what you get for talking all the way through my explanation! Now get to work!" was their reply.

Severus grabbed the ingredients they'd need and started to work, he shot James a glare when the boy looked through his book for the right page.

"Don't worry about it. I doubt you're going to be much help anyway. Don't stand too close to the cauldron."

"Why not?"

"It'll screw up your recovery."

"Well since I'm not going to recover anyway..." James stepped closer to see what colour it started out as, only to be shoved roughly back and pinned to one of the desks. His back hit it with full force, pulling his feet up off the ground. Snape leant over him until their noses were practically brushing, one hand on James' shoulder to keep him pinned, the other steadying himself on the

table. James' elbows shot backwards to try and keep him upright, but he only ended up almost colliding with the Slytherin's face in what would have been a very embarrassing encounter. Lucky, or perhaps unlucky, for him, Severus had him securely pinned. The class stopped moving to see what the commotion was about. James would usually be annoyed and embarrassed at being so easily defeated by his enemy, but it was all he could do to stop from fainting from the ferocity in Snape's eyes. It was moments like these that made him believe Snape might accidentally knock him off some time.

"Do you want to die?" he asked, voice loud enough for everyone to hear, but still deep enough to send a shameful tremor through James' body. To the class it sounded like a threat, but to James he knew it was just a warning. He shook his head a little, not trusting himself to speak, and was held in place for moment before he was released. "Don't get too close to the cauldron." the Slytherin repeated, lower this time, and husky again. James looked away, settled himself on the desk and began reading the directions, making sure he had them memorised by the time Slughorn came around. He wasn't going to look like an idiot when the teacher asked him how they'd achieved it.

Once the class was over, James was the first one out the door, shouldering his bag and not looking at any of his classmates, who probably thought the tables had turned and Snape was no longer the bullied, but the bully. They were right, of course, but they had no idea as to what extent.

"Hey, what was that about?" asked Peter as the rest of the Marauders caught up with him half way down the corridor. "You should have hexed the bugger." he added, James nodded.

"Should've, but I couldn't be arsed with the detention afterwards." He lied. He could still feel goose-bumps on his body that had erupted when Snape had pinned him, and he felt dirty from it.

Sirius gave a sympathetic nod, "Yeah, but still, 'do you want to die?' what a cliché threat!" he joked, James smiled coldly. Too bad Snape had the power to carry that threat out. He felt stupid being so scared of the boy they had bullied for so long, but even an off-hand comment like that could remind him that Snape was the one pulling the strings here. The Slytherin was completely in control over whether he lived or died.

He'd have to be more obedient in the future – it was obvious Snape wouldn't stand for misconduct.

Said Slytherin walked past, carrying his oversized bag and keeping his head down, making his way to his next class. James watched his back wistfully, remembering the fire blazing in his eyes. It seemed that Snape was angrier that he'd put himself in danger than the fact that he'd disobeyed orders. He had no way of being sure of that, however, and until he could, he would just have to be the boy's human puppy. He shook his head ruefully; Snape wanted him dead and it was just a matter of time before he lost his temper and saw it happen.

Dreams

Severus smelt like cinnamon and burning wood; his chin length hair tied back off his angular face with a black satin ribbon: the same ribbon that James was beginning to get a collection of in his bedside draw. He was wearing an untucked white uniform shirt, the top buttons undone to reveal pale skin and a collar-bone that jutted out a little too much, and dark jeans that hung low on the hips and tight over the rear. His breath was coming out in short pants and he had a fierce look in his eyes like he was furious.

James felt weak at the knees.

Which probably had something to do with the fact that Snape had just slammed him onto the nearest desk, so that his back was flat against it, and his feet physically left the ground. He tried to get his elbows out to cushion the fall, but the Slytherin was already leaning over him, his nose less than an inch from his captives. James felt himself swallow. He could feel the friction of their cocks rubbing together almost painfully through the fabric of their trousers, and the cold belt buckle Snape wore catching him on his bare stomach. His own breaths were coming out in high-pitched keens and moans, enough to entice a red flush to his ears. He put his hands on the boy's arms to steady himself, wanting nothing more than to touch him.

Severus' cold, long fingers moved to his nipples, flicking and twisting and rubbing the sensitive area. He dipped his head and James felt a long nose press into his chest before a hot, wet mouth was suddenly there. He gasped, and was met with a deep chuckle. Then; a low, husky voice filled the room, as if it was coming from all sides at once; but James could see Severus' lips moving around the words like he was tasting them.

"I own you." He said. "Everything you do, every thought you think. It all belongs to me now."

James nodded along in earnest, and the boy on top of him started pinching his skin, going lower and lower down his stomach. The pinches hurt, but they were swiftly followed by feather light kisses that somehow made it all okay again. When he got to James' standard issue school trousers he made quick work of the buttons and zip, all but ripping them from the Gryffindor. James was left naked; skinny and exposed on the desk. Severus stopped to survey him for a moment, before that cruel twisted smirk that should have been ugly but really wasn't made its way back on to his features.

"Are you going to be a good boy?" He asked, his tone teasing. James felt his mouth go dry, but all the same he spoke.

"Yes sir."

And with that Severus' mouth descended on James' dick.

-X-

James sat bolt upright in bed, panting and clutching his heart. It was beating unnaturally fast and it felt like his entire chest was being compressed. He puffed out a few over-exaggerated breaths as he attempted to calm himself. His dream had been... he'd actually had a dream regarding...

He glared heatedly down at the cloth of his loose joggers, which were covering his still semi-hard dick, thanks to the early hour. Traitor, he thought as he willed it to go down.

"Oi! Prongsie!" came a shout from the bed next to his. He quickly grabbed his pillow from behind his head and placed it over his lap, leaning heavily on it in a hopes of squishing the damn thing down.

"What?" he questioned, probably a little defensively, surveying his three friends, who were all sat around his bed as if it was story time; eyes wide and curious. James imagined that if humans had been born with tails, theirs would have been wagging excitedly.

"You said you'd give us details about last night remember!" reminded Wormtail, getting a little more comfortable on his spot on the floor, leaning against Remus' bed.

James rolled his eyes at the reminder; the night before, when he'd gone to see Snape about the potion, the marauders had assumed he'd gone to meet with his non-existent girlfriend. When he'd arrived at the meeting spot, he was warned not to puke; but he'd come very close nonetheless. The Elixir was probably the vilest potion he had ever had to drink, and he'd had his fair share of disgusting potions, most of which were used in some ingenious prank Remus had concocted, with no regard for the person actually drinking the potion. This particular one felt like it was freezing his insides, and for a second James thought he was going to get so cold he would pass out. Luckily he didn't, because he was pretty certain Snape wasn't going to catch him, and he didn't think he would be able to easily explain away any bruises hitting the concrete flooring in the dungeons would have given him. When he'd come back, (apparently much earlier than the boys had been expecting), they'd demanded details, and James had told them he was tired and he would tell them in the morning. However, he hadn't expected the morning to come so quickly. It wasn't exactly an 'I don't kiss and tell' situation if no kisses had been received.

He bit down a little harshly on his own tongue to distract himself when unbidden images of his bullied-turned-bully trying to kiss him filled his head. What in Merlin's name was going on with him?

"Do you guys have no lives?" he asked after a moment, grudgingly. He noted that he himself would be exactly where they were had he been left in Gryffindor tower while one of them went off the visit a mysterious stranger they refused to talk about.

"Of course we don't." replied Remus, "Now spill."

James sat up and sat cross legged on his bed looking around at the three other boys, who were also sat cross legged, staring at him intently, as if waiting for him to change his mind – so that they might pounce on him for the details. James shook his head to clear his thoughts of any more strange images of his supposed worst enemy before he began trying to curb his friend's desire for gossip.

"Okay, you want details?" He asked, and the boys nodded eagerly in reply. James carried on; "I got there, I almost threw up, then I left. End of."

Pete whacked his forehead with his palm in retaliation to James' bluntness; as the only one there with reactions quick enough before twelve o' clock to have worked out how ridiculously rude the boy had just sounded.

"You have no manners." He scolded. "She can't have been that bad. Was she?" He asked.

James shrugged, thinking about Snape, who had shoved the potion at him, told him not to throw up, and then only stuck around long enough to make sure he actually drank it and didn't get any puke on his shoes. The boy still seemed to be angry from the incident in their potions class, and wasn't exactly in a talking mood.

"Yes. He was terrible!" He seethed, still able to muster up enough anger at the Slytherin's total lack of caring over his well-being. A pat on the back for actually managing to keep the damn Elixir down would have been nice, at least. A flare of anger curled inside him. Usually it would start at the base of his stomach, but this was just below his heart. It was a particularly angry flame, trying it's very hardest to infiltrate his heart, but James could also feel it being held at bay by the potion he had consumed the night before. The potion might be helping by not allowing the disease to burn him to a crisp, but it did nothing to help with his mood swings. He was constantly bordering on angry: Angry at Snape, who was taking advantage of his situation; angry at his friends, who couldn't tell when to keep their noses out of his business; and angry at the world for choosing him to contract the damn disease to begin with. He knew it had something to do with Cinis, and kept wanting to ask Snape – but knew full well that the Slytherin wasn't about to become his own private advice line.

He noticed a definitive silence within their dorm, and looked up to see his friends staring at him with slightly concerned looks. Sirius was the first to speak, uttering one little word that made James shiver, despite not being cold.

"He?"

James paled considerably, trying to take a deep breath. Slips like that could be the end of him, his reputation, and his deliberate lie to keep his friends away from the deal he had made with the Slytherin. He would have to be far more careful in the future.

"Did I say he?" He asked, voice noticeably higher than it had been not moments before. In return, the marauders nodded. "Hell, I guess she did look rather masculine. It was a nightmare!" he laughed nervously.

"And you didn't know that before?" asked Remus, an edge in his tone that suggested he knew that he was being lied to. Despite the fact that Remus had spent the best part of three years lying to his friends about his furry little problem, the thing that annoyed the werewolf the most was being lied to.

"... No, it's complicated okay?" James sighed, trying to stop his own tone from becoming too defensive. "Are we done here?"

And they were done there. The other marauders decided not to question James, although it was obvious he was keeping something from them. James was a terrible liar.

Once everyone was done preening over themselves in the mirror and choosing the most flattering jumpers they could get away with in the September chill, they made their way outside and sat next to the lake, it was about as warm as it got in the grounds, and they intended to make the most of it. The giant squid flopped a lazy tentacle outside the water, as if waving to say hello to his favourite mischief makers. James pulled his jumper a little more around him, shivering as the cold whistled through the cable-knit and ghosted across his ribs. He looked out over the choppy waters of the lake whilst his friends chatted around him. He was still caught up thinking about that dream – the smell of cinnamon, the coolness of long fingers, the intense warmth of Snape's mouth on his... he coughed.

"Okay, so down to business!" cried Sirius happily, once the four of them were settled. He'd had enough of the animosity that seemed to have stretched between the marauders over the last week, and was desperately trying to get his companions back onto his favourite past time: pranking. "We've got a few people we need to extract our revenge on this year." he grinned.

"I say Filch is top priority!" Joined in James, glad for the excuse to stop mulling over the dream he'd woken from, "and with him comes that annoying cat."

He'd feel sorry for Mrs Norris; not only was she stuck with a horrible name, but she belonged to Filch. However, it was hard to feel sorry for a cat when she was just as bad as her master. He too was grinning though, his first week back had been tough, and he was looking forward to chilling out and kicking back with some good old fashioned pranking.

"After those comes Snivellus though." added Peter, with Remus nodding along enthusiastically. However, at the suggestion James stilled and his grin slipped. He was terrified to even look at the greasy-haired Slytherin in the corridor, in case the boy thought he was doing it in the wrong way. How would the hooked-nose boy react to his friends pranking him? How was James going to refuse to participate without risking his friendship and reputation? And even if he did refuse to participate there was no guarantee that Snape would not punish him for his friends' actions.

He paled, resolving to not use the word 'punish', or any variation of, whilst referring to the Slytherin again. It pissed him off that the boy was now invading his fantasies as well, as if James didn't think about him enough. He didn't need the mental images of the boy physically punishing him to remind him that Snape was completely in control of his life, his reputation and now, apparently, even his fantasies. He scanned the area around them to think of some inspiration for how to avoid his friends pranking his savior.

Lily was reading a letter, sat under an old oak tree, with a frown plastered on her face; as he watched he saw her try to catch the attention of the boy he was so often thinking about; Snape - but the greasy haired boy bypassed her, strolling purposefully towards Sirius' little brother Regulus; who was stood by the greenhouses talking to a bunch of older Slytherins. He shifted his eyes to the left, where Dumbledore was making his way out of the doors to the castle, deep in to a conversation with McGonagall. James turned his attention back to his friends.

"But remember we can't do anything too big to him." He reminded solemnly. Oh how he would love to extract his revenge on the Slytherin, but his life was on the line after all. Sirius gave him a look, having been involved in a conversation with Pete about what exactly they could do to the Slytherin, and having had been interrupted by the Potter heir's nervous muttering. He frowned as he mulled over what his friend had said.

"That's right, you guys are palls now, aren't you?" He said spitefully, crossing his arms. James looked up, having been staring at his hands playing with his laces, and searched Sirius' hard grey eyes to assess what was the best way to proceed. He felt a little angry lick of flames inside at being accused by the Black heir, but crushed them.

"What makes you say that?" he asked uncertainly, voice a little higher than usual. He wasn't sure how many more arguments their friendship could take before everything fell apart. They had barely fought at all before the beginning of this school year, now it seemed that every other thing caused a spark between them.

"You two were acting pretty friendly during potions. And now you're telling us not to prank him!" Sirius explained, but James rolled his eyes. Sirius was so... immature sometimes. One little chat in potions did not make the two fifteen year olds best buddies. If only Sirius had known exactly why James had been so eager to score brownie points with the boy, they would be able to avoid this

entire confrontation...

He sighed, looking around his friends. He wished he could tell them, he wanted to tell them, he wanted to avoid all the arguments his constant having to lie was developing – but he also wanted to avoid the worry and unnaturalness he knew would come should he give up and tell the rest of the marauders.

"Okay first off, if you remember he threatened my life. I would hardly call that friendly! And I only said don't do anything too big because Dumbledore's cracking down on it this year, remember!" He said instead, annoyed at himself for raising his voice. It drained mentally and physically to fight away the urge to yell all the time, to attack and hate and damn everyone who even slightly annoyed him. Sirius was his best friend, yet all they seemed to be doing was fighting. He knew most of it was his fault – he knew that instead of attacking the small first year that was dawdling to class the other day and getting in his way he had reverted to being spiteful towards Sirius, because Sirius was his best friend – a sounding board, and when needed a venting pillow, but he knew if he kept up then their friendship was going to be on the rocks.

Sirius deflated somewhat at the boy's outburst. James was still seething slightly, trying to curb his anger. The two of them looked away from each other, both unwilling to apologise for the spark.

"Whatever." Sirius muttered, and James knew that was as close as he was going to get to an apology from the Black heir.

"I think we should prank Lily Evans." Came Remus' voice through all the commotion. James shot him a surprised look.

"Why?" He asked, he'd been after Lily for a while now, so they'd never thought about pranking her before. Teasing, sure, but actual pranking, no.

"Just a thought." He shrugged. "We're both prefects now so it gives me more opportunities to think about it when we do the patrols together and stuff." All the boys looked to James. Remus was the mind behind all their pranks, if he suggested pranking Lily then he probably had something in mind.

James bit his lip as he thought. It could be potentially very funny, but at the same time he'd never get on her good side if he was pranking her. Then again, he was never on her good side as long as he was pranking Snivellus, and according to the rest of the marauders that would never stop. He knew Snape and Lily were friends, although he honestly had no idea what she saw in the dungeon bat, and wondered if they pranked her if Snape might take it personally and punish James for it. He furrowed his brow – was it wrong to want to prank Lily to test the boundaries with Snape?

"Okay" He finally replied, "If you've got something in mind we should... we should prank Lily."

The rest of the marauders exchanged worried looks. Something was definitely wrong with James. Remus suggesting they prank Lily was supposed to make him angry, not make him excited about the idea. What was wrong with their friend? He was constantly angry about the stupidest of little things, and then something they had pre-discussed that was supposed to make him angry was not worth the shouting? Sirius took a deep breath and decided to take a stand.

"Okay, what the hell man? You're acting like a bitch on her monthlies!"

Sirius had a habit of calling females bitches, when asked about it he denied vehemently that it was anything to do with canine instincts, but they all knew that their animagus forms had a direct effect on their human lives. Pete had a fondness for cheese that was rivaled by nobody, but if he ate too

much he would get sick. James himself often found himself wondering the woods late at night to calm down.

He didn't appreciate being called out for acting like a girl by someone who couldn't even control their animagus attitude. In retaliation, he snarled at Remus, unable to keep his anger at bay any longer.

"Wanna keep your dog on a leash?!" He attacked, making Sirius stand in anger.

James went to stand too, ready for the fight, but at that moment an Owl fluttered down from a nearby tree and a letter landed in James lap; a familiar black ribbon holding it together.

"And of course!" The dog animagus shouted, throwing his hands up in the air and rolling his eyes. "He gets an owl!"

James waved him off, shouldering his bag and making his way back towards the castle.

"Where are you going?" Pete shouted after his retreating back.

"Nowhere." The boy replied, not even bothering to wave over his shoulder as he rushed off.

The other marauders sighed, watching him go. There was little they could do if James wanted to be secretive, but Sirius was particularly angry. James had a habit of acting like a total bitch in an argument, dragging in people who had nothing to do with it – like Moony. Sure, Sirius and Remus play flirted a lot, but the boy didn't appreciate being referred to as the werewolf's dog.

X

When James reached the castle he went straight to the dungeons, through the classroom they used for potions, to Slughorn's storeroom, and picked up a glass of powdered unicorn horn. Just as the letter told him to do. The bookcase they kept the ingredients on swung around, taking James with it. He steadied himself on the other side, turned and went down a damp corridor with no portraits hanging on any of the walls. Once he reached a plain wooden door, he knocked twice.

"C'min." came the call from inside, James swung open the door slowly and entered the room cautiously. Snape was leaning over a cauldron with a displeased frown on his face. James clutched the letter at his side and bit his lip, anger subsided in the short walk up here, and replaced with confoundedness and nervousness. He wasn't sure why he was here, only that he'd been given directions and asked to come. Snape, however, did not seem to be in any great rush to greet him, so he stood awkwardly by the door. He'd never been in this place before, but it was relatively cosy; a little dark and he didn't like the colour scheme (Green and Silver), but still relatively cosy.

"Potter." He jumped at the sound of Snape's voice, straightening his back as if he'd been called to attention. He gulped when he found the other occupant of the room staring at him intently, dark eyes searching. "What do you know about Werewolves?"

James lowered his eyes and glared at the floor. He wondered if this was his order or not, to spill everything he knew about werewolves. With Remus as his friend, it was a fair amount, but he didn't want Snape to know any of it, lest the admittedly intelligent boy catch on. But what would be the consequences if he didn't offer up the information. Should he find his courage and refuse, or should he swallow his pride and lie that he knew nothing. He doubted the second option would work, Snape wouldn't have called him here if he didn't think James knew something. But did that mean that Snape already knew about Remus? He shifted from foot to foot nervously.

"I don't know what you're doing but I'm not telling you anything I know about werewolves." he

said, sounding braver than he felt, constantly reminding that Snape had control over his life. Snape stirred the potion once, and worried his lower lip between his teeth. He glanced at the boy, but then moved his eyes right back to his potion.

"I'm not trying to find out anything I shouldn't," he replied. "This is my work room by the way, You and Dumbledore are the only people that know about it. This is where we'll meet when I need to give you the Elixir," he explained, James nodded, trying to memorise the way to it. It wasn't too hard. He'd just have to remember which ingredient to pick up. Powdered Unicorn horn. He nodded again. He was glad Snape seemed to be in the talking mood, forthcoming with information, and not angry when James was not.

"... You're in the way."

James jumped again, suddenly realising the Snape was trying to get past him. He stepped to one side and Snape picked up one of the many books on the shelf James had been standing in front of. The book he'd picked up was one entitled 'Werewolf Habits'. James glared at it. Why did Snape want to know so much about werewolves anyway?

"Did you know Werewolves are insanely strong, even when in human form?" asked a voice beside him, all the spite it usually had disappeared. Snape's eyes hadn't even left the book. It wasn't unpleasant to hear. James nodded and cleared his throat; thinking back to the day before, when Remus had lost his temper and pushed him against the wall.

"Yeah, um... I did."

If this wasn't the most awkward discussion, then James didn't know what was. He looked around the room. Two armchairs and a sofa, all in black leather, a mirror, some bedding in the corner, folded neatly, and two doors. One was the plain door he'd come through, and the other must lead to somewhere else, which Snape wasn't going to elaborate on. There were no windows and no pictures on the walls. There was a Slytherin banner, and the Hogwarts crest, hanging from the wall to James left. The wall behind James, and the one to his right, were filled floor to ceiling with ingredients shelves and bookcases. Underneath the Slytherin banner was a small chest of drawers. On the side of the room opposite where James stood, three cauldrons were lined up. Two of them were bubbling. There was an old, fraying rug on the floor, separating the furniture. It was cream, but James got the impression it had once been white. It was so old, anything could have happened to it.

"This is... Homely?"

"I need it to be comfortable, in case I work too late and end up sleeping here."

That explained the bedding. "How often does that happen?"

"..." Snape didn't look like he was about to answer, but James didn't get the impression he was being kicked out either. Snape wasn't acknowledging him, but he wasn't telling him to leave. So he got up to explore, he wanted to know what was on the other side of the door. And when he crossed the room and grasped the handle without any protests, he figured it was allowed. He pushed open the door to be met with a small bathroom: sink, toilet, and shower. Really, how long did Snape spend down here? Next to shower, on a small shelf, were three bottles, one unbranded shampoo, conditioner to go with it, and an unbranded shower gel. Hanging by a hook in the wall, on the other side of the shower, was a light green flannel. He rose an eyebrow. He was under the impression that Snape never washed his hair. And he couldn't imagine Dumbledore coming all the way down there to take a quick shower.

"You know it's not polite to go through someone's stuff right?" asked Snape from the doorway of the bathroom. James jumped again and swiveled round. He found himself nose to chin with his enemy, having been closer to the boy than he had thought from behind. He instinctively took a step back, but not before inhaling an intoxicating smell from the boy's shirt.

"Sorry." he said instantly, somewhat afraid of Snape, especially when he was in his own... he'd called it a work room, but it really was more like a home. Not a home he'd live in, but definitely somewhere he could imagine Snape taking up residence. He was trapped in the bathroom, with Snape in the doorway and nowhere to run, and no weapon to fight with. Even if he did, he doubted he could physically overpower the Slytherin in his current state of wellbeing.

Snape turned on his heel and walked back into the main area, making the Gryffindor breathe a sigh of relief that probably didn't go completely unnoticed by his company. James followed like a puppy trailing his master, guessing that Snape didn't really want him in the bathroom. Snape had gone back to frowning at the potion he was brewing, so James decided to peek into the other cauldrons.

"Don't go near the middle one. The fumes will mess up your recovery... and your hair."

"My hair?"

"You don't seem to care about your health, so I thought if I mentioned your hair, it may have some effect."

James didn't need to be reminded that he was indeed a little vain, and supposedly stupid, but he used this as more evidence that Snape wasn't out to kill him, and felt his confidence grow a little more. With more conversations such as this one he might even find the courage to breach the anger issue.

"I won't go near it..." He promised. "I don't want to upset you again." he looked up to see Snape smirk. He was right, the Slytherin really was a sadistic bastard! And could only blush knowing that Snape knew the boy was completely under his thumb. That he was... afraid of him.

"So..." he wrinkled his nose at the smell of the potion on the far right. The only one not bubbling. "This is the Glacier Elixir isn't it?"

Snape nodded.

"If I shouldn't go near potions, why'd you send me to go sniff at the love potion?" the question had simply slipped into James' mind, and so he voiced it.

"You shouldn't go near incomplete potions. If the potions already complete then you've nothing to worry about." replied the Slytherin. James pouted.

"So this Elixir is already complete? Couldn't I just take it now?"

"It doesn't work like that. Besides, those are the remains. With the Elixir, you've got to wait two days after it reaches its coldest point before you throw it out."

"Why?"

"..." Snape stirred the potion again, looking more and more annoyed each time he did. "... It's a new potion. There isn't much research into it, we don't know how it will affect you." He explained, not looking up.

James nodded, he played with the hem of his school shirt. Snape gave an irritated sigh, but the Gryffindor got the impression that he was annoyed at the potion, and not at his questioning.

"Why did you get me to make that love potion then, if I can't be around incomplete stuff?"

There was a pause, in which Snape continued to work on the cauldron, but then he looked up, his eyes hard and cold, and just stared at James as if he should already know the answer. Upon reflection, James knew exactly why he had been told to make it. He'd felt particularly weak the day afterwards, and now realized why. Severus was just being vindictive in his very first order.

He lowered his eyes to the floor and heard;

"You can go, you know."

He left feeling oddly heartbroken.

Charity

The Potter heir woke up early the next day. He'd spent a good three to four hours the afternoon before walking around the forest as a stag, saying hello to the centaurs and the unicorns. Both creatures knew he was a wizard of course, and not a real stag, but there is a strange settled feeling amongst the creatures of the wood that if you are there as part of nature than you belong – and James felt nowhere more at home than he did wondering the paths between the trees.

When he finally arrived back to the Gryffindor common room, just in time for curfew, the air was frosty. Sirius and he gave each other a begrudging apology, but they both knew it was because they were sick of fighting and not that anything had actually been resolved.

He took a brief glance at the clock, seeing Pete still asleep, and read the luminescent numbers with blurry eyes. Five o' clock. He would never wake up this early normally, but today was a big day.

Quidditch tryouts.

Last year the cup had gone to Ravenclaw, despite their harsh and extensive training regime. Sally Wood, their feisty but often stressed captain, had decided there was nothing for it but to re-do tryouts this year for the whole team. James had been pretty secure in his position as Chaser since second year, and this was the first time he'd have to fight for his position in the team since then. He was especially worried now because he hadn't eaten anything substantial in over a week and a half, and he couldn't help but imagine if he was passed the quaffle it might just knock him off his broom.

He glanced over at Sirius' bed, who was snoring lightly with one arm dangling over the side. He too was trying out today. He'd never been interested before, but James had made him practice with him enough since they'd met that he'd shyly mumbled to the Potter heir at the end of fourth year that he'd like to try out for beater. He'd thought James might not want him on the team because Quidditch was kind of James' thing, but James had been nothing but ecstatic to find out his best friend wanted to join him on the team.

A school owl came tapping on the dorm window persistently, a letter wrapped around his leg with a black ribbon. He sighed, realizing that Snape was the only person he was likely to receive letters from recently, and opened the window, grabbing the letter but flapping the owl away.

The note wasn't addressed, or signed, and he read it outloud as he began to get himself ready for the day. With every word he whispered under his breath he grew paler and paler.

"Tryouts are nerve wracking, are they not?" He read, "I can't imagine you would do too well if you weren't wearing the proper kit. Perhaps, instead, a dress? Your order for the day is to dress in women's clothing. I am sure you won't find it too challenging, given your obvious skills for keeping your head in the clouds, to stay on the broom. And I've been told you know your way around a bra. Here's wishing you the best of luck for the upcoming tryouts."

He could practically feel the sarcasm coming off the page, best of luck in the upcoming tryouts his ass. Snape had been saving this little gem for that day deliberately hadn't he? The bastard.

James screwed up the letter in his hand, wondering whether it would be best to let out his anger by burning it, or simply hitting something, and tried to think about it logically. Snape wanted him to cross dress; he rationalized, trying to forget about the unfortunate connotations of the above sentence. It wasn't as if he just kept girls clothes around for such an occasion, and so realized it was good he had woken early, in order for him to sneak into the girls dormitory and beg them to let him to borrow some items.

He felt heat rising to his cheeks at the mere thought of the population of Hogwarts seeing him wearing borrowed, feminine clothing, and worse – somewhere above them on a broom. In his physically worn state, and wearing clothes not exactly made for spreading ones legs, he had no doubt today's tryouts would be a disaster. For all of Snape's comments of his knowing his way around a bra, he couldn't exactly see him wearing one himself. He'd say it was deliberate sabotage, but he doubted Snape had any interest in the sport itself and who won the cup at the end of the year.

Challenge one, however, would be getting the girls to agree to be charitable with their clothing. He could transfigure his own clothing, but he wasn't entirely sure it would have the desired effect – he didn't know women's clothing in enough detail to get it right, and in any case, using magic on clothing usually had a negative effect on the seams. He left the dormitory quietly, trying not to disturb his friends, after putting the letter in his draw. He was still in his PJ's, which consisted of loose hanging jogging trousers and little else, but he was sure the girls would rectify that – they would probably find his sudden wish to cross dress hilarious.

Once he reached the girls staircase he realized his real first challenge. He'd never been able to scale this thing without almost breaking his neck before, and he was fairly certain this wasn't going to be an exception. Still, grabbing the sides of the walls, he began to make his way forward, watching as the stairs turned to slide under his feet, he pushed against the wall and used his arms to support him as he scaled the height. He had a technique down from the hundreds of times he had tried this before, but almost instantly he felt his arms begin to shake from the physical strain of battle with his illness and the wall. By the time he reached the top, he'd slipped twice, falling back down to the bottom each time, cut open his leg, and his arms felt as if they were on fire. He hoped Snape appreciated the lengths he was going through to do this stupid task!

He steadied himself on the small platform before the stairs-turned-slide, just outside the fifth year girl's dorm, taking shallow breaths and wiping at the sweat that had accumulated on his forehead. There was the familiar, angry monster licking at his heart again, and he placed a hand there, trying to calm it. He leant against the door, and promptly fell through it.

A short, piercing scream assaulted his ears, and then;

"Potter! What the hell are you doing up here?"

The voice was melodic, but filled with indignity. It came out as a hushed stage-whisper, and James looked up to see Lily Evans, wrapping a silk dressing gown about her person, crossing the room to hush Alice. The two of them shot furtive glances, both at James, and at the other beds in the room, where the other girls were still trying to sleep. It seemed Lily and Alice had also been trying to sleep, if the croaky voices and remnants of yesterday's mascara were anything to go by.

"Can I come in? Is everyone decent?" James asked, a little belatedly, making the girls roll their eyes. He stumbled to his feet, clutching at sides, where he had a stitch from climbing the stairs turned slide.

There were five girls in the Gryffindor fifth year, but only one of them was about his size – and by that he was loathe to admit it wasn't particularly robust. He had been perfectly normal before, if slightly shorter than average and toned rather than muscled, but recently he had all but stopped eating, and when he did eat it made him feel sick. The disease was eating away at his body and he could feel it. The only thing that was stopping it getting to his internal organs was the Elixir, and that was a strain to earn every week.

"So what is it?" asked Alice, after a moments silence where the three Gryffindor's just stared at each other. James took a deep breath, trying to get some air to his lungs. Then;

"Would you mind if I... borrowed some clothes?"

The two girls raised their eyebrows in unison, then Lily spoke.

"Excuse me?" She asked, her voice typically Hampshire and higher than usual in her state of bewilderment.

"You heard me. Please may I borrow some clothes?" James repeated, fidgeting on the spot, wary that the two girls were openly staring at him. He sighed, remembering the letter he had received less than an hour before. "Specifically a dress if you have one."

Lily couldn't help it, a small giggle slipped past her lips at the image of the iconic Gryffindor Chaser in one of her dresses.

"Do you plan on wearing it?" She asked.

James messed up his hair, looking anywhere but at the teenagers in front of him.

"Well, that was the plan."

The girl burst into fits of laughter, hushing them almost as quickly as they started, shoulders shaking violently as they clung to each other to get the other to pipe down. James knew it wasn't to save face with him, they would laugh at him as openly as they liked – but more so that they didn't wake their roommates.

"Why?" asked Alice, once her giggles had subsided. The sole boy occupant of the room hadn't expected the question, but thought fast for an excuse.

"It's um... sponsored. I'm going to dress as a girl and ask people to pay me for doing it. Muggles do it all the time." and for that, he could kiss them, it was the perfect excuse.

"What charity?"

He'd forgotten Lily was muggle born. A charity... a charity?

"The registry office for half breeds. They need more money to help certain magical creatures find work." James replied after a moment's deliberation. He remembered Remus doing some work for them over the summer, since he wouldn't be able to find much work without their help. The werewolf was glad they even existed, even if they couldn't really do much, and so if James was going to do this, he might as well help his friend along the way. He'd turn Snivellus' little task into a charity event. Lily seemed to think about for a moment, staring at the boy intently, before she stood up and started rooting through her trunk.

"You're about my size right?" she asked absently, "Yeah... you're pretty tiny, considering..."

"Considering what?" he couldn't help but ask, wrapping his arms around himself subconsciously. He'd known he'd seen a marked difference in his weight since he contracted the disease, but he hadn't realized he'd begun to show to other people as well. He would have to start wearing baggier clothing.

"That you're a guy. And a popular one at that."

"Aww, Lils, you think I'm popular?" He joked, covering up his self-consciousness.

"Don't call me that." She scolded, pulling something from her draw and chucking it at the boy, who caught it with Chaser like reflexes and unfurled it, holding it out at arms lengths. He made a face.

It was a dress. A wide necked dress, with half sleeves and a silky material, it hung shapeless, but Lily ushered him towards the adjacent ensuite bathroom and he reluctantly pulled off his joggers and replaced it with the dress, which he was annoyed to see hung loosely on him around the neck and shoulders, falling to his mid-thighs. He wasn't a fan of the dark green material, but pushed through the door to get the girls opinion anyway, standing awkwardly with his legs apart and his arms stiff at his side. Lily drew a chunky, pale pink belt around his waist and pulled it tight, so that he looked as if he had more of an hour glass figure. He grimaced at it, and took a step back when Lily drew her wand.

"What are you planning on doing?" he asked defensively, ignoring his voice quivering ever so slightly. She smirked.

"If you're going to do this, you're going to do this right! It's just a quick shaving charm. I do it all the time." James' eyes widened and he shook his head slightly, but he knew that you really couldn't wear a short dress with hairy legs, and, wondering whether he could ask if she had any longer (preferably floor length) dresses, she took the opportunity to perform the charm. He watched, un-amused, as he dark leg hair fell to the floor, leaving his legs silky smooth to the touch. It was so... Feminine. He'd shifted uncomfortably as the dress bunched up around his boxers, and shook his head firmly when Lily noticed.

"You want to be walking around with half your underwear hanging out all day?" She asked, "There's a reason girls wear these." She added, holding up a brand new, still packaged set of knickers. James begrudgingly took them, trying not to think about lace, of all things, and walked back into the bathroom to an entourage of Alice's giggles.

"Just need to do hair and make-up now." Lily greeted him as he came back out, blushing madly and walking awkwardly. James grimaced again.

"No way!" he shouted, trying to put his foot down, but he knew it had been hopeless as soon as he had asked to borrow the dress. Lily never did anything half-heartedly, and she would make damn sure that if he was wearing her clothes, he would look good in them. He sighed relenting. "What do you plan to do?" he asked, defensive again, messing with the hair on his legs was one thing, messing with the hair on his head was completely different, and he had no clue what type of junk she might put on his face. Lily dug through her trunk again, until she pulled out a light pink headband. It had never suited her, clashing with her hair colour too much, so at least someone would get some use out of it.

"Just put this on." she said, flinging it at him. He caught it and placed it on his head. Lily fussed with his fringe for a bit, then produced a bottle of Sleekeazy from her bedside cabinet, which made James wince at the sight. He relented to letting her thread the potion through his hair, a settlement of guilt pooling at the base of his stomach. Once she was done his usually messy hair fell straight, elongated because its usual flicks and curls had been stretched out, and come to rest elegantly at

the base of his neck like a short bob. He could smell the chemical element of the potion that so much reminded him of home, and all of a sudden he missed the little cottage in Godric's Hollow that belonged to his parents very much.

"I hate that stuff." He mumbled, frowning at his reflection in the mirror. Every time he saw it was a constant reminder of how much his father was disappointed with his potions grades, and that he was the heir to a potions making company that he had no interest in. With Snape's orders the last few days centered on brewing potions, the untimely producing of his father's prize and glory was a quick slap to the face, and he felt his mood swing dangerously towards anger.

Lily may have replied, but she was busy concentrating, and was already rubbing moisturizer into his cheeks. Alice had come over with a black tube and took off his glasses. They pinched and pulled at his face for a good half an hour, eventually he was granted his glasses back and turned to face himself in the mirror of the girl's dressing table.

"I don't think I can do this." he moaned. Lily patted him on his back, giving him the 'it's all going to be fine' smile. James sighed and pouted.

"Why's it green anyway?" He asked, pulling at the folds of the dress, and the chunky baby pink jewelry Alice had given him, a large hearted pendant and some sparkly bangles. "I feel like a Slytherin. A girl Slytherin!"

"I'm a redhead, I suit green. And you suit green too, so don't be such a baby!" James sighed again, pushing out a thank you, despite not being particularly grateful for what they had done to him, and made his way back down the stairs. They immediately turned into a slide again and deposited him at the bottom ungracefully. He winced as pain ran up his ribs and brought his legs together, uncomfortably reminded that he was wearing panties that did little to cover his junk, and blushing at the stares he was getting from occupants of the common room; Peter being one of those. The rat boy walked up to his friend and offered a hand up, who took it gratefully.

"What'd they do? I think dressing you like one of them is a little drastic. Then again, what were you doing up there in the first place?" asked the boy, grinning in a way that suggested he was trying not to laugh. James laughed nervously.

"Actually, I agreed to this. I'm doing a sponsored... thing." he couldn't quite bring himself to say cross dress to Wormtail. The boy raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"I see... but don't you have tryouts today?" he asked. James felt a familiar clench in his stomach, the uncomfortable feeling of nerves and dread.

"Yeah, well... the show must go on!" he laughed, not feeling particularly funny, noticing Sirius tripping down the boy's stairs, followed by a just as sleepy Remus... how long had he been dressing in the girls dorm? Sirius spotted Peter and made his way over.

"Hey Tiddlywinks, you seen Prongs?" He asked the rat-animagus. Peter chuckled nervously and James moaned. He couldn't look that much like a girl could he? He knew they'd made his eye lashes longer and his lips a bit redder, and of course he didn't have his usually wild hair to give him away, but he was standing right there! "Oh sorry, are you new? I'm Sirius by... the... Prongsie?"

James rolled his eyes, now much more accentuated – making the action look pretty rather than scathing. Sirius was an idiot in the mornings. He gave a cute sarcastic curtsy. Sirius grinned.

"You know I'm really starting to have my doubts about you Prongs." James gave him a curious, confused look. "Well, first off you 'accidentally' fall in love with me and end up kissing me,

secondly, you tell us your date was a 'he' - although you did clarify that was a mistake - but now your dressing as a girl?... are you sure you're not gay?"

James whacked him round the head.

"I'm not gay! This is sponsored."

He was really starting to like that excuse. Remus came up behind him and hugged him tightly round the middle, taking a deep inhale through his nose. James squeaked.

"You smell nice." was the only greeting he got, and James remembered the girls spraying him with some sort of perfume. Remus was the worst for waking up in the mornings. "Have we met?"

"Remus... you're such a pervert." Remus blinked a few times. He was? "You can't just go around hugging and smelling young girls." James explained, granted he wasn't a girl, but Remus obviously had it in his head that he was. Sirius was laughing his head off somewhere in the background, but James was too intent on making sure Remus didn't do this on a regular basis.

"But... You smell nice." A heightened sense of smell being another werewolf perk. James rolled his eyes, trying to break out of Remus' strong hold around his waist.

"Remus it's me!" he almost screamed. Remus blinked again.

"Jamie?" James nodded. "No... Janie." Sirius started up his laughing again, and this time Pete joined in. Remus somehow found it in his heart to let go of James, who had been struggling against the hug for a little while. James glared.

"Sponsored cross dressing Remus. It's not that uncommon in the muggle world!"

Remus seemed to snap out of it. "What charity?"

He and Lily were so alike. James flushed a little, looking anywhere but at his friend. Remus was the one he was doing this for really. Snape may have ordered him to do it, but Remus was going to be the one he'd have in mind when people laughed at him. He was doing this for Remus.

"The registry office for half breeds." he mumbled. Remus blinked a few more times, before enveloping him into a hug again, a tight, bone crushing thing that made his friend choke slightly. Sirius had stopped laughing now.

"Hey Prongs?" he asked. "Why do you keep doing things without tell us. We totally would've joined you... but we don't have any girl's clothes!"

James smiled. "I didn't either. I borrowed these off Lily. I'd say you could get some too... but you guys are all a lot bigger, and so..." he blushed. "well, you know."

"yeah, we know you've got the figure of a preadolescent girl." replied Pete, which earned him a glare, a lick of anger trying desperately to get at his heart, spreading its black hate, but being held at bay by the fact he was trying to do something nice for his friend. He really would have to keep an eye on his weight. As it was, Sirius decided now was the time to start laughing again.

Wolf's Bane

James walked quickly down the hallway, head bowed and trying not to take notice of the stares he was attracting, wishing now more than ever that he was wearing the standard issue Quidditch uniform and not... what he was wearing. With every step he took he felt himself grow warmer and warmer at the looks, and he clenched his hands at his side angrily, cursing the man who had put him into this position. He had spent hours in the boy's dormitory pumping himself up to face the music and walk down to tryouts, and now, if he didn't hurry up, he was likely to be late. He had Sirius by his side, urging him to move faster - but it wasn't exactly easy to walk fast when his junk was being crushed by the flimsy material of the lacey knickers. He squirmed slightly, trying not to look up, when he felt himself bump into someone. He looked up into twinkling eyes.

Dumbledore. James hadn't spoken to the man since his first day back at school, but the elder gentleman stared down at him through his half-moon glasses with a mixture of amusement and worry. James knew what he was going to ask and kept his eyes trained at the baby pink sandals he had on his feet, only now noticing his toenails had been filed and painted. Those girls really had done a number on him. He tried to gesture over at Sirius with his eyes to warn Dumbledore not to say anything in the Black heir's presence, but Dumbledore was typically ignorant when he wanted to be.

"Morning James." said the aging headmaster, the twinkle growing ever brighter in his eyes - he obviously found James' situation highly amusing, if anything else. "Got anything in paper yet?" he asked, only a hint of seriousness in his voice. James chose to ignore the look he got from Sirius at the question Dumbledore had asked, and instead shook his head.

"What do you mean sir? This is for charity." He laughed, though he knew the man would see right through his act. Dumbledore rose on elegant eyebrow, raising a wrinkled hand to cough politely into.

"You know they don't give you uniforms at the tryouts. I don't think your attire is very appropriate." said the wise old man, James nodded and ruffled his hair nervously, marveling in how the sleekeazy allowed it to lay down flat, smooth and long against his neck again, despite his nervous habits, and making a note to tell his father that for the first time in his life he had relented and allowed the product to be put on his hair.

"The things I do for charity!" he exclaimed. Wary of the time, he bid the headmaster farewell and hurried off to the pitch, dragging Sirius along behind him and hoping that the upcoming tryouts would be enough to distract his friend from the awkward conversation they'd just had with the bearded man.

When they arrived they were met with Sally and the rest of last year's Quidditch team that James had grown to know and love, save for the couple of 7th years who had left at the end of the last

season and that one 2nd year who barely made it through the first match. There was a bunch of other Gryffindor guys and girls, including a few 7th years, all excited to get up in the sky and show what they could do. James was confident to say the least, but even he paled at the idea of older teenagers seeing him in this particular ensemble, and using the material as leverage for teasing. He could take it from his friends, he wasn't sure what his reaction would be when faced with an older enemy.

"Potter! You're late!" yelled Sally, James scowled at the high-pitched shout, already feeling that familiar flick of annoyance at the entire situation.

"No I'm not, I'm just not early!" he protested.

"Don't take liberties, just because you were on the team last year does not mean you'll get on-" she paused, as if taking him in for the first time - "what are you wearing?" she asked, Sirius grinned; and may have been about to launch into speech but Sally saw the expression on his face and held up a silencing hand instead. Sirius may have been a marauder, but this was his first time trying out and James could tell he was nervous, as he instantly clamped his mouth shut.

"On second thoughts, I don't want to know." Their captain said instead, then blew her whistle. "Chasers; in the air. Keepers; by your posts. Beaters and Seekers sit this one out."

And, after all was said and done, the tryouts did not go so absolutely terribly that James was kicked off the team and right out of Hogwarts, as had been his fear. Contrary, Sally had been rather impressed with his ability to ride side-saddle and not show anything indecent to the spectators. She may have been a little wary of how often he seemed to sway every time a Quaffle was chucked his way, but generally put it down to the attire, rather than his physical state. She had also been impressed by Sirius' quick reflexes, which were emphasized by his quick wit, (she also may have been just a little bit charmed by his flirty nature), and the two boys walked away feeling rather pleased with themselves. Granted, they had no clue if they'd actually made it on the team, but Sally's attitude had made them happy. James and Sirius met up with the other two marauders outside the pitch, both with identical grins on their faces.

"Nice one Siri, I love how you kicked the Quaffle to Jerkson while hitting away the Bludger. I think you'll make a great Beater!" Encouraged Peter, somewhat in awe, as Quidditch had never been his thing and he was still trying to get his head around why anybody would want to be that high up in the air. James was about to add his support as well, when the Black heir was tapped on the shoulder by a younger, more feminine looking version of himself.

"Reggie?" Asked Sirius, a confused look on his features. The two had barely spoken since they got back from summer break.

"Have you seen Sev?" asked the early teen, looking subdued, like he'd rather be anywhere else than talking to Sirius. "He's been missing since this morning." the kid explained. Sirius just scoffed.

"If I had seen him I would've given him a good hexing." He laughed. Regulus just rolled his eyes, then looked directly at James.

"What about you Potter?" He asked. James felt himself turning cold. As far as he was concerned the only people who would have reason to believe James might know where Severus was would be himself, Snape and possibly Dumbledore. He hoped that Snape wasn't laughing up their little deal with the younger Black sibling – he'd hate for Sirius to find out from Regulus.

"I haven't seen him. It's not like we're friends or anything." he told Regulus, crossing his arms defensively. The young Slytherin looked down, then looked back up at him through his eyelashes.

James had seen Sirius do that exact same thing, it always made James cave in. James sighed; he'd always had a weak spot for Sirius' little brother. Although he was in Slytherin and knew exactly how to manipulate you into giving him what he wants (like what he was doing right now) he could also be a witty, care-free kid, and James had always said if he was sorted into Gryffindor he could almost have been a young marauder apprentice. "If I see him I'll tell him you're looking for him." He promised. Regulus nodded, looking at the floor, and ran off towards the castle. Sirius rolled his eyes at James.

"That kid worries too much. And you worry about him too much." he scolded, James grinned.

"Probably, but he's just such a cute kid." He teased, knowing exactly how protective Sirius could be. He sent a deliberately dirty look at the early teen's retreating back, and ducked out the way as the older Black aimed a swipe at his head. He smiled. "Aren't you glad he's at least talking to you? I mean, what happened? Last year you guys met up for daily chit-chats – this year you've barely even looked at each other."

Sirius furrowed his brow.

"I know." He agreed, whilst the four marauders fell back in to step beside each other. "I think he's mad at me."

"Why would he be mad at you?" Asked Remus.

Sirius shrugged.

"Hell if I know, he's thirteen. He's probably mad I stole a girl he had a crush on or something."

The four Marauders slowly made their way back to the castle, lingering in the last hours of summer air, as autumn was creeping in. Chilly air was ghosting its way under their robes as they dawdled towards the grey walls. James wanted to stay outside for a little longer, as tomorrow was Monday and they'd be back in lessons, and so wouldn't be able to enjoy the outdoors. Remus had to remind them that as animagi it was now easier for them to sneak out than it had been before. And even then they'd had the help of the cloak and the map - which Remus would still have to rely on. James had to agree, and for the most part had a good rest of the day (minus getting laughed at most of the time for his unusual choice of clothing; he found once his peers initially got over the shock and listened to his explanation, he was simply left to his business.) he also made a fair amount of Galleons for the Registry Office, he collected it all together back in the common, after a full day of walking around in a dress. He was sat down on the Gryffindor common room floor, still wearing the outfit borrowed from Lily, being careful to keep his legs together, and not sit cross legged as he was accustomed to, as the clock ticked its way towards curfew, counting up the amount of Galleons he had raised for his chosen charity. Personally, he'd thought this had been the best order Snape had given him so far. It hadn't been overly embarrassing, and he'd been able to help out a friend.

Once he'd counted it all up he told his friends he'd be taking it down to McGonagall so she could send it off, and left the common room with Sirius for a last stroll before they were confined to Gryffindor tower for the rest of the night. On the way they had no complications, and McGonagall seemed very happy with the work they'd done for charity, and awarded them house points. On the way back, however, they ran into Regulus.

"Oh hey..." he mumbled, after accidentally bumping into them. There was an awkward pause, then Sirius lifted his hand to ruffle his brother's hair. Regulus ducked away, but Sirius tried to act unperturbed.

"Should you be out this far into the castle? It's almost Curfew, shouldn't you be nearer the dungeons?" asked Sirius, always protective. James rolled his eyes behind his best friends back.

"C'mon Siri, like you weren't sneaking out for late night strolls in third year." he tried to reason. Sirius gave him a 'you wouldn't understand' look, and maybe James wouldn't, he didn't have any younger siblings after all. So as much as he could scream hypocrisy, James might never realize why. So instead he just shrugged at the third year Slytherin

"I'm looking for Sev!" glared Regulus, a rosy defiant stare to his older brother, daring the boy to send him back down to the dungeons. James, however, froze.

"He's still missing?" he exclaimed, it had been a number of hours since Reggie had last come to them, where could Snape disappear to for such a long time? He clenched his fists. What a jerk, to make Regulus worry so much - was it so much just to send an owl? He grit his teeth in anger, a sudden thought striking him. It was one thing to mess with his head, but Regulus was supposed to be his friend, and you couldn't just disappear from your friends for hours on end! He snapped his fingers and took off towards the dungeons, shouting for Sirius to go back by himself. If there was one place the boy would be for so long, it was likely to be that den James had been invited into before. He would go there, despite not wishing to be in the Slytherin's presence, and tell him he needed to keep in contact with his friends. A foreign concept to the bat, he was sure, so James would be nice and show him the error of his ways.

His white hot anger made him wish he could beat the boy into showing some respect for the younger Black, but he knew, even if he psychologically made himself do it, without the threat of Snape holding his very life in his hands in the most easiest way possible – James' physical strength simply wasn't enough to be threatening ever since his contraction of the disease.

Eventually, James came to a stop outside the bookcase in Slughorn's storeroom, trying to catch his breath. He wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Reggie, he repeated to himself. It wasn't as if he cared about Snape's wellbeing; only that Snape had to be alive so that he could continue making the Elixir for him. He was only there because he was annoyed that the bastard had worried Regulus - and also because he'd dressed in a fucking dress and Snape had hollowed himself up in his workroom, so hadn't even seen James' efforts. He grabbed the right ingredient with too much force, and ended up swinging the bookcase too fast, depositing him on the other side with a thump. He groaned audibly to the corridor as another spasm of pain shot through his ribs, rendering him unable to breathe for a moment. He scowled at the magic turning bookcase and stood back up, brushing himself off and making his way along the dark corridor slowly, still conscious of his racing heart trying to pump blood around his uncooperative body, until he came to a plain wooden door that he recognised.

He knocked twice, rhythmically, and a loud call of 'C'min' came from inside, James figured that Snape must have thought he was Dumbledore, the only other person to know about his workroom. He pushed open the door to see Snape leaning over a cauldron and stirring it cautiously. The lanky haired boy looked up as James stepped inside and closed the door behind him. His look of surprise very quickly turned into a scowl.

"My showing you this place does not give you the right to visit whenever you please." he advised, disdain heavy in his voice. James gulped, now not entirely sure what his plan of action was. He had to be careful after all, Snape did hold his life in a closing fist.

"Regulus... He's been looking for you all day." He finally decided to say, biting down on his inner cheek when he had finished. Really, he couldn't think of anything wittier to say than that? Snape rolled his eyes and picked up a book from the floor next to the cauldron.

"And you volunteered to find me? Isn't that a little suspicious?" asked the taller. James blushed a little, embarrassed, thinking he was somehow being scolded. He glanced for the book title. 'Wolfish ways'. What was it that Snape was working on?

"I guess," he said. Snape's eyes stopped their steady crossing of the page, and slowly, he looked up to the boy. His eyes scanned James' body and attire – still in Lily's borrowed outfit. James could feel himself heating up under the stare.

"How did try out's go?" Asked the Slytherin, and for a brief moment James thought he was actually being civil, and then he looked up to see that devilishly confusing smirk. There was a pause whilst James decided whether he should answer or not, and when it became too long he ended up just making a squeaky, non-committal noise. Snape sighed. "That dress, it is Lily's?"

James nodded.

"She found it very amusing." He added, hoping that little fact might appease the Slytherin. Snape smirked again.

"I bought her that dress for her birthday." He supplied, and James suddenly found it hung on his in all the wrong ways, and clung to him too tightly, like it was suffocating him. "It would not have fitted you when I bought it."

James swallowed. Merlin, had Snape noticed his weight loss?

"I guess." He supplied, when it was obvious the Slytherin wanted him to say something.

Snape surveyed him with his dark eyes raking over his body as if he were some form of abstract painting he was trying to figure out the meaning of. James turned slightly to the side at the look, crossing his arms over his stomach.

"Go to the bathroom door over there, if you knock three times it turns into a kitchen, go and make yourself something to eat." Severus said. "I won't allow you to leave here until I see you eat it."

James glared at the floor.

"I've had my order for the day." He mumbled, but what in Merlin's name made him believe that would work was lost to him when he heard Snape laugh.

"Don't you know the first thing about Cinis?" Asked the Slytherin. James regretfully shook his head; he'd tried to find some information in the library but he'd been told it was in the restricted section and would need a note from a teacher – which he'd never found a way to get. Snape rolled his eyes. "If the disease doesn't get you by engulfing you in flames, it will find other ways; things the Elixir can't fix. You can't eat can you? – It's why you're losing so much weight. How do you expect to catch Quaffles if you can't stay on a broom? Cinis is already messing with your balance, your moods and your core temperature – don't let it get your appetite to. Keep at it the way you're going and I'd be surprised if you last more than a month."

James knew he was right, but even when he did eat, he couldn't keep it down. He felt weak and stupid for even considering saying what he was about to say, but he could see no other way.

"I can't." He eventually said. "I'll just sick it back up."

Severus nodded.

"I know it can't be easy." He said, and James' head snapped up so fast at the tone it gave an audible

click. He'd never even heard Snape be civil, let alone... if he didn't know any better he'd say Snape just sounded... sympathetic. "You have to eat. Eat a little at a time so as not to shock your stomach. Eat in company so that you eat slower. Don't try spicy or sweet foods, but bland things like potato's or pasta... Just... go to the kitchen and make yourself something."

James nodded, before:

"Do you want anything?"

Severus may have been about to decline, but at that moment the boy's stomach chose it an opportune moment to growl, and he couldn't deny it. He hadn't exactly eaten either. He waved a hand as if to say 'do what you want', and James crossed the room to the small wooden door. He knocked three times and then pushed it open to reveal the bathroom had gone and was replaced with a kitchen.

It was small, but well equipped. The cupboards were stocked with a bunch of cereals and crackers, breads and pasta, tinned tomato and baked beans. In the fridge were cheeses, some ham, cucumber and a few bottles of water, in the small freezer was sweetcorn, peas, and fish. There was also some potatoes, mayonnaise and jam. Then some pumpkin juice and a large amount of magical sweets. He didn't know Snape had a sweet tooth... Once James was done exploring he got to work creating something to eat. He kept in mind what Snape had said about eating bland things, and put two jackets in to the oven. It would be almost an hour before they finished cooking, which might give him some time to pep-talk his stomach into keeping it down. He emptied some baked beans into a saucepan on the stove and heated them up to a simmer for whenever the jackets were ready. Until then... perhaps he should entertain himself in the main room?

"Did you know Werewolves get ill around the time of the full moon?" Was the greeting he got as he entered the workshop area. He instinctively nodded his head, and Snape let his eyes roam back to his book. James wrung his hands in and out of one another, thinking back to his conversation with Dumbledore that morning.

"Will you write down our deal?" He asked quietly. "So in case I lose my memory I know what's going on? I mean... were doing Memory charms in charms soon, and my Charms work is terrible, and I was just hoping that..." he trailed off, trying to figure if he should have used a different word for Charms... that sentence was beginning to grind on his nerves the more times he said it over in his head.

"No." James snapped his head up. "If I wrote it down then you could show anyone without meaning to. I know you're trying to hide this from your marauder friends. So I say 'no' in your interest." James looked down. He couldn't ask again right then, maybe he'd try a different, more subtle approach, later. He nodded.

"Right. Okay... um... why do you want to know about werewolves?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him as he spotted the book Snape had been reading resting on the side of the chair.

"I need to know more about them to be able to perfect a potion I've been working on." Snape replied.

"What potion?" James pushed, worried for his friends safety. He didn't know Snape was working on his own potions at all – He knew a thing or two about developing potions, with his father's company, and it made a lot of sense. The boy was constantly trying new combinations in his cauldrons, and jotting down notes about what might work better. But what was the boy trying to achieve with the end result?

"Wolf's Bane." The Slytherin replied, as James deposited himself down on one of the large black leather armchairs. They were surprisingly comfortable. Snape nodded at his own train of thoughts. "Wolf's Bane works..."

"Wolf's Bane." James repeated, crossing his arms, and not liking the sound of whatever Snape was experimenting with. The lanky haired Slytherin nodded, obviously finding it difficult to keep his concentration on the conversation when the potion itself was bubbling away in the corner.

"The idea is to stop the effects of the Werewolf transformation. I don't think there's any way to cure Lycanthropy, or else someone would have done it by now, but I am sure I can find a way to curb the effects so that werewolves wouldn't be any harm to others or themselves. Hopefully it should also make the transformation itself less painful." he added the detail, which had James edging closer to the edge of his seat.

"Why?" he asked, after a pause.

"Because there's a war coming Potter, and I don't want Him to be able to use werewolves against us."

Him... James looked at the floor, then around at the Slytherin banners and obvious house colour decoration of Snape's workroom. "I thought for sure..."

"I'd be on the dark side?" supplied Snape, James made no move to agree or disagree. Snape shook his head.

"So... Wolf's Bane will help werewolves?" asked James hesitantly, Snape, after a pause, nodded. James thought of Remus, and the trouble he would have finding a job after school, if there was a potion to make his transformation 'safe', then he wouldn't have half as much trouble. "I want to help!" he exclaimed. Snape gave him another look.

"You can't."

And James was crestfallen, "But... I don't need to go near the cauldron to help." he protested. "I'm knowledgeable about werewolves..."

Snape's eyes snapped up.

"If you promised to only use that knowledge for the potion... and I can send owls to remind you to keep in contact with Reggie, and go into the stores to get ingredients so you won't have to leave..." he trailed off, watching Snape come around to the idea of an extra pair of hands.

"Why so sudden an interest?" The Slytherin asked, folding his hands together. James averted his eyes to the ground, so as not to get caught lying.

"I just... I want to help. It'll give me something to do." He lied, then the oven in the kitchen beeped and their conversation was put on hold. James came back a few moments later with two identical plates of jacket's and beans. Snape took his, and watched as James sat down with the other plate.

"You've plenty to do. I won't stop giving you orders." Snape said, then nodded for James to raise his fork and have a mouthful. James did begrudgingly. He nodded once he'd finally finished chewing and had swallowed. He felt it nestled in his stomach and he instantly felt bloated.

"I know, I didn't ask... But, I'm not a bad person." He said. Snape snorted, "I know we haven't been that nice to you, but you've got to give me a second chance. I know I can help with this

potion! I want to help!" he reasoned. Snape shook his head.

"I don't have to give you a second chance." he replied, "But I will let you help. In return, you will eat whenever I tell you to."

James gave him a shocked look. Was he striking up another deal here? Trading the chance to help make history for Remus for daily reminders to eat? He couldn't exactly see the downside.

"Okay." He agreed, and Severus motioned for him to take another mouthful. The Slytherin took a mouthful himself, chewing thoughtfully. He placed his fork back down on his plate and levelled James with an odd look.

"You won't receive an order tomorrow." He warned. "Focus on eating."

Truth

When James got back to the Gryffindor common room, it was way after curfew, and he'd had to take a few detours to avoid Filch and the demon cat. He fell through the plump lady's portrait with a goofy smile plastered on his face, still dressed in Lily's borrowed clothing, and happy that he was once again able to help out his friend. He had no idea Snape was working on potions at all, let alone one that could actually help out Remus. Not only that but with Snape's guidance he'd been able to hold down half a jacket potato and beans. He brought a hand to his hair and ruffled it. He couldn't help but feel a small tug of affection for the Slytherin, and although that should have made his smile falter, it only made it grow. It did falter, however, when he saw Sirius sat by the fire, sending him a glare. They were about to get into another fight, he could tell.

"...Hey," he said awkwardly, sitting down next to his best friend. Sirius spared him a glance, but other than that brushed him off. James tried again, "Hello Sirius."

"Hello Stranger." was the reply. James sighed. "Where have you been?" questioned the taller boy.

"Down in the Dungeons." answered James honestly, staring at his feet.

"Meeting with your boyfriend?" asked Sirius spitefully. "You came in here looking like you'd had a good fucking." James quickly shook his head, Snape was NOT anything like that, sure he'd not had an entirely unpleasant time but Sirius had obviously lost his mind if he thought James' smile meant he was down there getting off.

"I found Snape..." he said instead, leaving out the fact that he knew exactly where he'd be. Sirius tutted. "I told him to stop worrying Reggie." he added, playing with his shoe laces. Sirius kept his gaze trained on the fire.

"You took your damn time about it. And you shouldn't worry about Regulus so much anyway." he said. James laughed.

"Bit rich, coming from you."

"I'm his brother... and I didn't run off to find some greasy git just because the kid was upset." James leant against the chair, focusing his eyes on the fire. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, Sirius clench his hand into a fist. Sirius glanced across at James. "I also didn't dump my mates in potions to have a chat with said greasy git, or turn against the love of my life and then keep my mates from pranking my worst enemy, or keep making up ridiculous plans and not include my friends... I can't believe you're fine with us pranking Lily, but won't let us prank Snivellus! What the hell's gotten into you?"

James stayed silent, Sirius had stood up during his outburst, and was about to storm up to their dorm. They were practically alone on the common room, except for a few 1st years trying to prove they could stay up late, and the odd 7th year already studying for the NEWTS. Pete, the early riser, was also an early sleeper. And it was getting close to the full moon, so Remus was getting tired easier, and had already gone to bed as well. James caught Sirius' wrist to stop him from leaving. The taller boy growled under his breath.

"Sorry." James apologised, looking him dead in the eyes. Sirius sighed, dislodging his wrist from James' hand.

"I don't care anymore. I'm fucking fed up of your apologising. I want to know the truth! I'm tired of

being left in the dark!" James shifted his gaze back to the ground, but stood up, trying to stop Sirius' from leaving.

"I can't..." he trailed off, and felt a hand whack him lightly on the arm.

"Whatever the hell you've got yourself into, we can help." Sirius grabbed the handful of the material of James shirt. Better that than hitting him in frustration. "I don't care how much you fucked up. I'm worried about you!" he said in a loud voice, attracting a few glances from the 1st years, and a wolf whistle from a cocky 7th year who had witnessed their scene in the hall the other day. Sirius gave that person the finger. James glanced over at whoever it was, then placed his hands over the fist Sirius had around his shirt, loosening the hold slightly. He nodded.

"Snape..." he swallowed, and he could feel Sirius' grip tightening again at the mention of the Slytherin's name. "He... saved my life."

Sirius let go of James' shirt.

"He... what?" He asked, taken aback. James just nodded, and Sirius dragged him up the stairs to their dorm, after the 7th year made another comment on their closeness. Sirius pushed James down onto his bed, and then went about making a few loud noises to wake up the other Marauders. Remus sat up, bleary eyed and grouchy, Pete clicked a few joints, then gave his whole attention to whatever Sirius and James had done this time. Sirius, after making sure that Remus wasn't about to fall asleep again, flopped down on his own bed, and turned his eyes to James.

"Explain." he ordered. James nodded, looking at the folds in his sheets.

"Over the summer I got ill... Anyone heard of Flamouriadesis?" Remus gave a small gasp, which James took as a yes. He gave a small, dead chuckle.

"It's terminal..." explained Remus, noticing the other boys confused expressions. "If left alone... It's not pretty..."

"Well, mine was treated, I was given this potion, which makes it go away for a week. Then I have to take another one once the weeks up." the Marauders nodded gravely. "The annoying thing is that, there's only one person alive who actually knows how to brew it..." he sighed.

"Snivellus." Sirius supplied, and James nodded. "So... what happened? Why all the secrecy?" he asked, James blushed, now fiddling with his sheet folds.

"I guess... Me and him -"

"He and I."

"Fuck Remus, he's telling us he's terminally ill and you're correcting his grammar?"

James chuckled.

"Sorry..."

"It's fine!" James smiled at his werewolf friend. Remus gave half of one back. He was worried. "Snape and I struck up a deal... He'll make the potion for me, and I have to do one 'order' a day from him... like today's was to cross dress."

Sirius went faintly green.

"What a pervert..."

James blushed, knowing exactly what Sirius must be thinking.

"It's for the public humiliation," he assured hurriedly. "Cause we picked on him so much... he wants to get back at me. It's perfect. For him anyway..."

"So what happens if you don't 'obey'?" asked Pete. James sighed again, he seemed to be doing a lot of that.

"He won't make the Elixir. Snape likes the potion to be called Elixir." He explained.

"But then, won't you...?" Remus trailed off, turning deathly pale. "That bastard's messing with your life!" he grumbled, trailing off into an inhuman growl. James flinched.

"Well yes..." he agreed. "Please don't remind me."

Remus gave him a pitying look. Sirius just glared at the wall, and Pete decided to speak up.

"So... where do you draw the line?" he asked. Everyone knew what he was on about, but no one else had the guts to voice it. Pete always dealt with the difficult topics. James flinched again, thinking about what things Snape might have forced him to do if he'd been that way inclined. The more time James spent with the Slytherin the safer he felt that all the boy wanted was some revenge and to be left to his own devices, – but if it hadn't been Snape, if it had been some creep who wanted something more... intimate, for his services, what would James have done?

"I don't really like to think about it," he replied, "Look, let's just forget it, okay? I make a fool out of myself anyway, so there will practically be no difference."

"We're not just going to forget about it Prongs!" shouted Sirius. James got more comfortable on his bed, laying down, and dragged the covers over himself. Sirius changed into a dog and pounced on him, making the smaller boy squeak. Sirius changed back.

"This is important, man," he said, sitting on his friend's stomach and looking down at him with dark grey eyes. James leant up, hitting him lightly on the shoulder in an attempt at normalcy.

"I know... but there's nothing anyone can do, except Snape," he mumbled. "I didn't want to tell you, I want to be able to just chill when I'm with my friends," he whined childishly. Sirius nodded once and turned back into a dog, giving James' hand a quick lick before pouncing back over to his adjacent bed.

"You better not die Prongsie," he said when he was back in human form, snuggled under the covers.

"I'm glad you told us," said Remus.

"I'm glad you know," said James, looking at Sirius. Hoping now they wouldn't get into so many fights.

"I'm glad Lily isn't on a rampage to get her clothes back," said Pete, making James remember he still hadn't changed. The boy was tired though, and soon fell asleep, still in the clothes Lily had given him; he'd clean them before giving them back.

X

The next day James woke in a cheery mood, way before everyone else, and just looked around at his marauder buddies, smiling serenely. He was glad they now knew, and the fact that they did also meant that Snape had no other excuse not to write down their deal. He quickly changed from Lily's clothes to those of his own, and used a cleaning spell on the borrowed items. He thought it probably best he just ditched the knickers, but everything else could be returned. The best thing about today, if Snape kept to his word, was that he was order free!

"You're up early Prongs." said Pete, stretching out his joints and grinning at the Quidditch player. James smiled back, a cheeky grin falling into place.

"Ye~ah..." it came out as a whisper, and he ended up yawning in-between it, so he coughed and tried again. "Yes! I think today's going to be great."

"Good to know you're in such good spirits!" replied Pete, changing into his school uniform. The boy made his way down the staircase into the Gryffindor common room and James heard him say a cheery hello to a few passersby. Monday, Monday, Monday... he thought, a grin slipping easily onto his face. He stumbled into the bathroom to wash the make-up off his face and as he looked into the mirror was almost disappointed to see the Sleekeazy had lost its affects during the night, and his hair was back to a wild bird's nest. He collected Lily's outfit and followed his friend downstairs, grinning at everyone he passed. Perhaps he'd be able to help out more with that potion today, he thought, thinking of the sleeping werewolf upstairs who was suffering because of the full moon's proximity. When he arrived in the Gryffindor common room Pete was talking animatedly to a few girls from a couple of years below. Pete's boyish good looks made him attractive, but rarely to girls his own age.

It was as he was observing this scene that a hand grabbed his shoulder from behind. He let out a string of swear words, jolting into the air at the contact, and when his body calmed down he held a hand to his chest, where what felt like a firework had gone off inside him.

"Sorry if I scared you..." trailed off a small second year girl. James, who could hear Pete and his girls cracking up behind him at his jumpiness, shook his head slightly.

"Its fine I guess." he mumbled back, fighting the lick of anger that was curling inside his stomach.

"You got an owl." Said the second year, producing a letter from her pocket.

James groaned, whenever he got an owl recently it was from Snape. He grudgingly snatched the letter from the scared second year, who scurried away as soon as possible. He suppressed the angry growl which was trying to make itself known.

Dear James

Oh, so it wasn't from Snape then, that was a relief.

Meet me outside our defense classroom at lunchtime? I'll be waiting.

Lucinda.

James searched back through his mind for someone called Lucinda who he shared Defence Against the Dark Arts with. He vaguely remembered a blonde girl who sat near the back. He smirked nonetheless, as usually when he got notes like this it was to set up a confession. Was this Lucinda going to confess? He hoped she was cute, because damn he needed something to distract himself with, and taking someone out on a couple of dates might be just the way to tell his mind to stop having weird sexually charged thoughts about Severus Snape.

Threats

James leant casually against the wall outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, trying to get that 'sexy but not really trying' look that Sirius always seemed to achieve with little to no effort. It wasn't to say that James found Sirius as attractive, but girls told him often enough that his best friend was apparently Merlin's gift to all witches. It was a lot to live up to. James reflected that girls seemed to have an annoying habit of telling a dude's best friend that they were crushing on that dude, and just leaving it up to them to deal with. James had a well-polished plan for dealing with those situations:

'He's gay'.

Of course that almost always led to the girl crying, and Sirius being annoyed at the stain on his reputation, and James hated dealing with crybabies, and Sirius' slightly prissy tendencies, so he would have to go with the back-up:

'Hey, I was only joking, he'd love to go out with you'.

Which would usually end with an insanely happy witch and Sirius cursing him out because he'd been set up with some first year. The Black heir was at least nice enough to take whatever love-struck preteen had asked out on a date before crushing her dreams of marriage and three perfect children.

In any case, James wasn't entirely sure he was getting the nonchalant sex-god look right, but it seemed to be going okay if the looks from passing girls were anything to go by. He'd been waiting for ten minutes, checking out every witch that walked down the corridor in case they might be a Lucinda, and trying not to get increasingly uncomfortable at the idea of being stood-up, when he heard a deep, but distinctively female voice behind him.

"James Potter?"

He spun around to see a pale girl about his age with long blonde hair split into thin pig-tails and tied with dark green bows. She was wearing the standard issue grey uniform skirt that had been shrunk into the mini style, and she'd cut her black robes so they formed more of a jacket, her sleeves cut short to her elbow. Her Slytherin tie was loose and her top three buttons were undone to show the very top of a pink lacy bra. James cringed inwardly, ready to cue the awkward conversation about how he didn't date Slytherins, especially ones that made a habit of dressing like prostitutes.

"Lucinda?" he timidly asked, and the girl nodded. James gave a shaky laugh. She beckoned him into the classroom, and not wishing to embarrass her in front of everyone mulling about in the corridor, he followed.

"Potter." she stated again once they were in the classroom, turning round with hands on her hips. James awkwardly grinned, pushing a hand through his hair. Lucinda didn't smile back. "I know you've been hanging around Snape lately and I'm here to tell you to stop it!"

James rose an eyebrow at her. He hadn't realized anyone had picked up on the bond that kept him to Snape. They met secretly in a room no one but them and Dumbledore knew about, and all orders

came through the post. Was this girl super-observant or was Snape telling all his little Slytherin buddies about their deal? Laughing it up that he was ill and entirely at Snape's mercy.

"I don't see how it's any of your business," he replied steadily, despite the need to shout and rave and demand she tell him how she knew. Lucinda huffed indignantly.

"Look, I don't like you, you don't like me. But Snape is a freak! Nobody likes him! It's in your best interest to stay away!" she reasoned. James turned the thoughts over in his head. He didn't like Snape, but he didn't trust Lucinda more than he didn't trust Snape. And that was saying something.

"Not that I have" James started, "But what's it to you if I've decided to let bygones be bygones and start afresh with him?" He asked, sitting down on the desk.

His company sneered. "You're the most popular guy in school, even if you don't deserve the status. And Snape isn't... he's not one of us. If you keep hanging out with him he'll start thinking he's better than he is!"

James couldn't help but feel insulted on the Slytherin's behalf. Sure, Snape made himself an easy target at times, but this woman looked on him as if he was genuinely inferior. James would bet she had no idea he was smart enough to make his own potions, or was the only man alive who knew how to brew the Glacier Elixir. He felt a pang of guilt stab at him – he and the marauders had been the ones to ridicule him before, but James had always assumed he'd had some friends in Slytherin he could go to once they were finished with him. Lucinda had told him Snape wasn't 'one of us' – and James knew that Severus had resisted the blood purity gangs. Was Snape being bullied by his own house for being against he-who-must-not-be-named?

"Maybe he is better than you think he is." He eventually replied, trailing off once he realized he was more talking to himself than he was to Lucinda. The other occupant of the room snarled at him.

"Just heed my warning Potter," she said, threateningly. "Both you and Snape, and all you're little Gryffindork buddies! One day you'll regret not going to His side. And you can tell Severus that he can't class himself as a Slytherin anymore! If he shows his face in our common room again he'll regret it!" She finished, stalking out of the room in a huff. James felt anger blaze in him at her words. He rushed out the classroom after her.

"Your threats are out dated Bitch!" He shouted, unheeding of the other students walking down the corridor. A few stopped to see what was happening. "Snape doesn't need you're stupid common room anyway!" he defended, but Lucy only turned with an ugly smirk on her pale lips.

"That's right, he can always bed with you right? You two are such a disgustingly adorable couple of faggots!" she screamed back, lashing her body away again and storming off down the hallway. James blushed at her back. He'd meant the Snape could always bunk in his workroom. He had forgotten she wouldn't have a clue he even had a workroom. He childishly stuck his tongue out at her back, and gave a worried look at the students who had stopped because of the commotion. Would they believe her? They wouldn't possibly think there was actually something happening between him and Snape would they? What did he care if Snape was chucked out by his own house anyway? Even if it was kind of sad that he was being isolated for resisting blood purity gangs. He shook his head determinedly, turning the corner and bumping into Pete.

"Wormtail!" He shouted in shock, then bit his lip nervously. Sure, he'd told the marauders why he was hanging around more with Snape, but he'd obviously not mentioned his conflicting thoughts on whether the Slytherin was actually a decent guy or not. He didn't really want to be caught defending the boy and being accused of sleeping with him by one of the marauders. "Did you..."

did you hear any of that?" He asked nervously. Pete shook his head.

"No what's up?" He asked, and then didn't wait for an answer before he said: "Here, come on! Remy's got a plan!" and started dragging the boy off down the corridor. James grinned, letting the thoughts of Snape slip from his mind. If Remus had a plan, that meant a lot of fun for the Marauders.

- X -

"Alright." said Remus, later on in the evening once they'd gone to their afternoon classes and were chilling out before dinner. The four boys were sat in a circle on the floor of their dorm room, hunched over the map. Remus had filled them in on the main parts of the plan that lunchtime, and now it was time to go over specifics and get things in order. "She should be walking around here about that time as it's on the prefects rounds, so that's the best place to put it." he said, under his breath, despite the fact they were the only people in the room. Sirius nodded understandingly.

"But Sex-Muffin, where will he get that... super... glue... stuff?" he asked, crawling over to Remus to get a better look at the place he was pointing to on the Marauders map. Remus coughed a little at the pet name, as Sirius put his hand on the werewolf's knee to get a better look, he reached over the Black heir to the trunk beside his bed, awkwardly pushing his chest up against the other boy's cheek. Upon pulling out the superglue he winked.

"It's all good, Angel-Cake!" He replied, smirking, making the other marauders roll their eyes at the play-flirting.

"Okay." said James, studying the map as well, and trying to ignore his best friends need to one up each other on awful pet names. "But where are we going to get a cow?"

"Way ahead of you." replied Pete, "There's a farm over in the fields by Hogsmead. We'll use the passage under the old witch, and bring it back the night before."

Remus nodded along.

"The cow can stay in the passage overnight, and then it's just a case of leading it up a couple of staircases without anyone noticing. But we have the invisibility cloak for that right?" Said the Werewolf. "Besides, we've got plenty of time to prepare. The exam isn't until a month or so away, which gives Pete and I time to make the Poly-juice potion."

James cringed lightly, starting to have second thoughts. If all went to plan, this could seriously screw up Lily's education. She'd HATE him. Still, he figured, glancing around at his friends, it was the most monumental prank Remus had thought up for quite a while, and he was simply glad he had his friends back and wasn't sparking with them anymore. He grinned around at them as a young boy came crashing through their dormitory door.

"Sirius! Please, you have to help!" Gaspd Regulus, panting. His robes were ripped and he had a long gash along the side of his face; that made all four marauders stand up protectively, ready to fight for the younger Black.

"Who did this?" asked Sirius, seething. Regulus caught his breath back, and glanced quickly at James.

"I know you don't like him..." he said, trailing off, and James quirked an eyebrow. "They got him when he came back after classes... Lucius and Narcissa..."

"Caught who?" Asked Sirius, but Regulus bit his lip, looking all around the room but not at his

brother – despite being the one who had come asking for help. He sighed.

"Apparently Lucinda put them up to it." He said, staring straight at James. For his part, James had a sudden flashback to that lunch time and launched himself across the room, pausing slightly to clap Regulus on the shoulder.

"Which way?"

"Down by the dungeons. He was heading for his potions classroom..."

James nodded, signaling for Remus to stay behind and comfort Regulus and for Sirius and Pete to follow him. Usually James would want Remus with him in a fight but the closer to the full moon it got the less in control of his own strength Remus got, and whilst James would want the Slytherin's roughed up a bit, he knew Remus wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he hurt someone too badly. Besides, Regulus and Sirius still weren't really talking, so leaving the two alone might not be the best idea. The last thing he saw was Remus awkwardly examining the gash on the younger Black's cheek before the dormitory door swung closed behind them.

The other three boys rushed down through the castle, and were in the entrance hall, at the door leading down to the dungeons when James stopped.

"Go find Lucius, and Narcissa. Give them a piece of your mind for hurting Reggie. If you see a girl in blonde pigtails..." he trailed off. He wanted to say give her a piece of his mind for hurting Snape, because damn it the marauders were the only ones allowed to hurt Snape, but didn't want his friends to know about their fight earlier, and the things she had insinuated. He pointed them in the direction of where they all knew the Slytherin common room was, and headed into the potions classroom on his own. He found Snape just inside the store cupboard, wounded and panting heavily. James crouched down beside him, and placed a hand shyly on his shoulder. Snape groaned.

"What are you... doing here... Potter?" he panted. James shook his head slowly, trying to quench his anger at the sight he was seeing.

"Be quiet." he said, quietly and deliberately pulling Snape up and trying to balance the extra weight while pulling on the powered unicorn horn. He lost balance on the other side and the two fell to the floor, exciting a groan of pain from Snape. "Sorry." He said, dragging the other back up and beginning to make slow progress down the dark hallway, suddenly very glad no one knew of this place. He opened the door with his foot, using some form of funky ballet move he didn't know he knew how to manage, and dragged Snape inside, depositing him on the sofa. He gave a great sigh and turned to take a look at their surroundings. Then back at the injured Snape.

"Why are you here?" asked the Slytherin again. James felt a small blush taint his cheeks, though he wasn't sure why he was suddenly feeling so hot. Snape looked much older and wiser, laying injured on the sofa. It suddenly struck him just how secluded they were down in the workroom – nobody really knew it existed but them. It was like he was getting to see a very private part of Snape, and he felt an overwhelming gush of pride at the idea.

"Reggie came to us. Looked like crazy, worried over you, you know?" he babbled, "Pads and Pete should be beating up the guys who did this to you." He added.

"Great." said Snape sarcastically, turning over gingerly. "All I needed, another reason for those pureblood bastards to hate me. Why would your little marauder buddies do anything to help me anyway?"

James shrugged. "I didn't tell them it was for you. Sirius and Regulus are brothers after all, he's bound to want to hurt the people who made Reggie so worried."

Severus seethed out a breath through his teeth, clutching at his side. James watched, fascinated, as he pulled off his baggy grey t-shirt to reveal smooth skin underneath – marked by a large purple bruise all down his right ribs. James felt his mouth fall open at the sight – Severus was all long, pale limbs and understated but toned muscles. James watched them flex as he clenched and unclenched his stomach in pain. He didn't even notice he was staring until the other boy spoke.

"If you could drag your eyes away from my hideous form for just a moment, there is a medical box here somewhere."

James turned away in search of the promised medical box, a deep red staining his cheeks. He'd been about to tell Snape he was anything but hideous.

"Your house hate you anyway don't they?" He choked out instead. "Just bunk down here for the rest of the year... it's more private anyway..." he mumbled, distracted as he moved the bedding around looking for the first aid kit. Once he finally found it, he picked it up with a small, victorious sound. He turned with the box in hand, walking back over to Snape and kneeling down beside him. Snape reached out for the box, but James slapped his hand away gently, placing the box next to him on the floor and carefully maneuvering Snape's body so he could see the wounds easier. His clothes were ripped all over, and there was a large amount of bruising to his stomach and arms. It seemed like they'd been avoiding his face. Perhaps the gash on Reggie's face has been an accident when the kid jumped in.

"What would happen to Regulus?" he heard Snape ask quietly, while James applied generous amounts of a thick goopy paste to his bruises. It fizzled and dissolved and made the black-blue bruises on his stomach and sides already look fainter. James could imagine that the whole process hurt like a bitch, but Snape was incredibly calm and quiet. What would happen to Regulus if Snape stayed down here? James pouted.

"He'll be fine. No one messes with Reggie and gets away with it, remember? Sirius would beat their asses if they tried anything." He assessed, keeping his eyes trained on his work. He felt Snape tense under his hands; probably not used to being looked after. James knew it must have been difficult for the Slytherin to trust him to do it at all. He couldn't deny having those toned muscles clench under his fingers felt curiously awesome. He carried on talking when he realized where that train of thought was going. "You, on the other hand, have no one who cares about you. Other than Reggie, who let's admit, couldn't hurt a fucking fly. And Lily, who is busy with prefect duties. So it makes sense to just stay out of the line of fire." he reasoned, tying a bandage round a particularly nasty looking gash on the Slytherins arm. He looked up in time to see Snape rolled his eyes.

"And how will I get my personal belongings?" he asked, carefully sitting up, and wincing slightly in pain. James gave him a pitying look.

"Me and Sirius will go get them." he said, "We're good at... sneaking around." he let a small grin slip onto his features. Snape snarled.

"Not a chance in hell Potter!" he spat, snapping his head to look away. James had a brief moment of looking uneasy, before he smiled again.

"Alright, Me and Remus will go..." Snape shook his head. "C'mon. Moony's never done anything to hurt you, if we ever bullied you it was me and Sirius, Moony didn't want a thing to do with it. He didn't think you 'deserved' it."

"I didn't."

"... Yeah, sorry about that." James gave a shaky smile. "And hey, my life's on the line right? Like I'd take the chance to mess around. You have my word. I just want to help out."

"Like with the potion?" Snape asked skeptically. James nodded. Snape coughed, and James could see it caused him a great deal of pain.

"Why have you changed your tune?" Snape asked, giving the Gryffindor a searching look. James wanted to tell him he felt guilty for everything he'd put the boy through, that he was beginning to realize that Snape wasn't a bad person, and he almost wanted to tell him that he just wanted to keep the image of a bruised and topless Snape private to himself. But stubbornness won out in the end.

"I just need you alive to keep making the Elixir." He lied.

X

Later that evening James padded into the Slytherins workroom quietly; a small amount of clothing slung over his arm, and a bag of other possessions on his back. He let his eyes settle on Snape, who was sleeping soundly on the sofa, knees bent in, one arm swung lazily over his stomach, and the other brought up close to his face; hand making a fist. James couldn't help the small, serene smile that graced his features at the sight. Snape looked peaceful while asleep; without his usual scowl in place. James let his eyes swipe around the room, with the three cauldrons lined up on the far wall, the Slytherin decorations and the creamy rug on the floor.

"You're lucky you've got this place you crazy bastard..." He whispered, glancing back down at the Slytherin's asleep form. As if hearing James statement, the boy turned his head slightly and took a strong intake of breath, making a high pitched whistling sound. James snorted in amusement. Looking like this Snape looked... harmless. James had to remind himself this was the same man who could cut his life force off like it was a piece of thread.

"What did you do to get them to beat you up so bad anyway?" He asked the dreamer, sitting down on the floor beside the sofa. He looked lazily over Snape's sleeping form. He had never put his shirt back on and was covered in bruises; at some points he would move or breathe in the wrong way, and his face would contort in pain, yet between those times he had never looked so at peace and well... stunning. James sighed. What in Merlin's name was going on? He was supposed to hate Snape, so why was he suddenly finding points about the greasy haired, hooked nosed bastard that made him seem... easy on the eye? He rested his head on the edge of the sofa, pulling off his glasses and closing his eyes; trying to rid them of the blurriness that often comes with sleepiness. At ten past midnight, it wasn't surprising that he was feeling a little tired.

Before he knew it, he had fallen asleep.

Reminder

Remus Lupin looked over the younger Black sibling, dressed in his Slytherin tie and shiny black shoes and with his robes fitting him perfectly like they were tailored (which, Remus reminded himself, they probably were). His jet black hair was long, like Sirius' – not as long though. Sirius' hair fell just passed his collar bone, whereas Regulus' fell neatly to the nape of his neck – seeming to grow out in thick luxurious curls, rather than down like his brother's did. In fact, the boy stood before him looked remarkably like Sirius – with the same piercing grey eyes, and unfathomably defined eyebrows, and strong jaw and manicured hands and slim frame that was held with a confidence only found in the oldest of the pureblood families. He had half a mind to ask him how he managed to get past the fat lady and into Gryffindor, but the way his shoulders were ever so slightly hunched told Remus the boy was tense enough, and the large gash on the side of his face looked painful, and should probably be seen to first.

He swallowed audibly; awkwardly. Out of all of the marauders he probably had the least to do with the younger Black sibling. He knew he'd been left behind simply because he might end up seriously hurting someone if he was taken down to the fight, and he was okay with that; glad even, that James was looking out for him. But Merlin, he had no idea what to do with the third year Slytherin he was supposed to be looking after. He wasn't even entirely sure if he knew the kid's name.

"So... Regulus, right? Did you want me to...?"

Regulus looked him over, all cold grey eyes and long lashes, all the way from the top of his head to the scuffs on his shoes, and back up again. Remus couldn't remember a time he'd been quite so nervous under another boy's gaze. Unless you counted the time Freddy Prescott had carefully peeled off Remus' shirt during one of their make out sessions back in third year and Remus had been terrified the other boy was going to be disgusted with the scars on his chest.

"Please." Replied Regulus. It was one barely audible word, and it sounded hoarse and husky and it was heavily laden with the posh-kid accent he'd been bought up with in the Black household, that Sirius' had ditched the moment he got to Hogwarts, and it was fucking delicious.

Remus took the three steps over to the other boy and bought up a hand, using two fingers to push away some of the curls of Regulus' hair, that had managed to get stuck in the dried blood on his face. Regulus watched him carefully with dark grey eyes, and the werewolf found himself shuffling nervously from foot to foot.

"I'm don't... I'm not good at healing spells." The Gryffindor admitted. He inwardly cursed at himself. This was ridiculous! The boy in front of him was Sirius' younger brother for Merlin's sake! And yes, okay, they had obviously inherited the same unreasonably attractive genes, and Remus did have to daily congratulate himself for not reading any further into Sirius' stupid play flirting than he did, but that gave him no right to be perving on Padfoot's look-a-like baby brother. Completely disregarding the fact that the boy was thirteen years old.

Regulus opened his mouth to speak and the werewolf's eyes instinctively fell to his full, pink lips as he did.

"Can you clean it?" He asked, and Remus felt himself nodding along before he'd even considered the question. Showing off was something James did for Lily, not something he'd ever found himself doing before.

He cleared his throat, raising his wand and pointing it at the wound on the young boy's face.

"Tergeo." He said softly, and watched as the dried blood lifted itself from Regulus' face, leaving the cut still there, but clean. Remus breathed a sigh of relief that it had actually worked, because he wasn't sure how embarrassed he would be if it hadn't, as he had so brazenly declared that he could. Regulus gave him a smile, a genuine smile that left Remus feeling slightly weak at the knees.

"Sirius is lucky to have you." The boy said, a slight bitterness to his voice. Remus allowed himself to look over the younger Black once more – so very much like his brother, but younger, with higher cheekbones and smoother, slightly paler skin. It wasn't that Remus had some misguided crush on his best friend, but no one could deny that Sirius was attractive – and Regulus was just Sirius in miniature, but more obtainable because they weren't friends, whilst also being less obtainable because Sirius would literally kill him if he found out Remus was having impure thoughts about his brother. The Slytherin looked up at Remus now with his big grey eyes through long dark lashes, looking for all the world like a porcelain doll. He had a look in his eyes like he thought Remus might just pounce on him and Remus had half a mind to actually just pounce on him and claim his prey and...

Fuck.

-x-

Lily Evans read over the letter she had received from home with sad eyes; trying to compose herself for the inevitable moment when James Potter would burst through the doors to the great hall and try to hit on her. It was breakfast and the post had already been, so he would surely be coming through the doors any second now with his band of merry Marauders in tow. She had to be composed when James did that, or else she was likely to curse him, and that didn't give a good impression for the first years. She was a prefect after all. She didn't feel composed at all though, and she never did when she got letters from home.

It wasn't like she didn't love to hear from her parents, and she still writes them weekly letters to tell them all about her lessons at school, and they tell her about life at home. They tell her all about next door's new puppy, and the boy down the street who broke his leg in a car accident and the vicar at church had been awarded a special certificate for his good work, but they absolutely never mention Petunia.

Lily tries to tell herself she doesn't want them to mention Petunia.

But she does.

She wants to hear about her sister so much it hurts. Or better yet, she'd love to see her sister's neat, curly writing. Petunia had barely spoken to her since she'd got her acceptance letter to Hogwarts; at first Lily had put it down to jealousy, but as the summers drew on with Petunia taking every opportunity to be out of the house and not around her younger sister, Lily had begun to think Petunia really did see her as a freak.

She folded the letter neatly and placed it in her school bag. The owls had been and gone and

breakfast was beginning to draw itself to a close. There was still no James Potter there to hit on her though. She couldn't say she was entirely surprised – He'd been backing off more and more as the term progressed. Was this him playing hard to get? She wondered. She sighed, playing with the cheerios in her bowl, swilling them around with her spoon, and looked up as someone heavily deposited themselves down opposite her.

Sirius Black looked for all the world like he'd just flown down from heaven. The boy really was a marvel to look at, not that Lily would ever dare mention it to anyone in case it got back to him and swelled his already oversized ego. He was all windswept hair and unblemished skin, but Lily noticed a small bruise beginning to bloom on his jawline. She wouldn't be surprised if he'd been getting into fights – even with one of their numbers as a prefect the Marauders had an uncanny ability to cause trouble.

Sirius reached for a piece of fruit from the middle of the table, and offered her a short smile. It seemed that without the other Marauders with him, he had no one to show off to. He looked thoughtful and approachable, when not surrounded by the other boys he was so often with. Unable to help herself she smiled back, and almost instantly Sirius' turned into a smirk. She bit her lip, wondering if she'd made the wrong move, or interpreted his intentions wrong.

"Don't tell me Gryffindor prefect Lily Evans is actually willing to smile at Hogwarts famous trouble maker and heartthrob Sirius Black!" He teased, winking. Lily rolled her eyes, which had lost some of their sadness. Sirius Black was a bit of a security to her. Potter had obviously decided she wasn't worth his time this year, and the whole world seemed like it was beginning to spin in the opposite direction. She'd been managing to hold it together because even though it had been five years since her sister had smiled at her, things at Hogwarts stayed relatively unchanged.

She quickly and discretely wiped her eyes, choking back the sobs that threatened in her throat, but Sirius had caught her in the act. She couldn't believe she was so worked up over a stupid letter from home.

"Merlin, Evans – are you alright?" He asked. She placed her hands over her eyes as if she could catch the tears and keep them in. She felt stupid for breaking down in front of one of the Marauders – Sirius Black no less.

"Evans."

She looked up to see Sirius standing over her. He helped her to her feet and wrapped an arm protectively around her and walked her out of the great hall. Once they were outside, in a small area of the entrance hall that wasn't overly crowded, Sirius turned to Lily and held her at arm's length.

"Evans." he said again, and Lily let tears run silently down her cheeks. Sirius wasn't acting normal – he was supposed to make witty comments about how good James was on the Quidditch pitch. She wiped her eyes and attempted to steel herself.

"I'm sorry." She said, once she'd calmed herself down enough to talk. Sirius just shook his head.

"I know what you're feeling." He said, and while Lily seriously doubted he did, she decided to keep quiet, since he had been so nice so far. "When you're feeling down you need your old securities around you... This year has had a really rocky start." he added, a little quieter. When Lily raised her swollen eyes, she realized that he was no longer looking at her. She leant forward very slightly, and fisted her hand around his school shirt; she was trying to be threatening and get back some of her composure.

"Black." She said, looking down at the floor between them. Sirius sighed, and placed a large hand over her delicate one.

"It's all going to be alright Evans." He reassured.

"Black." Lily repeated, more firmly this time. Sirius rubbed his thumb over the back of her fist, still curled around his robes.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asked, sounding awkward just asking the question. Lily suddenly wanted to tell him everything; about how her sister hated her and she had no idea how to bridge the gap, and how she just wanted things to be like they were before the summer, when James was still desperately in love with her and provided her with hours of entertainment whilst he attempted to win her affections. She wasn't entirely sure that was the type of thing she should be telling him though, and instead shook her head.

"Not now." She said instead, finally letting go of the boy's robes, and drawing herself up to her full height. "I'm going to be late for class."

Sirius laughed, but as she turned to leave he caught her wrist.

"Just... If you ever do want to talk, you know where to find me."

X

"Prongs!"

James felt himself being walloped on the back with a fair amount of force, before he lost balance and suddenly was hurtling towards the ground at an alarming rate. Luckily, whoever had originally been his attacker saw the error of their ways and caught him round the middle, steadying him on his feet with a concerned look.

"What the fuck Pads?" James asked, distorting his body in an attempt to rub at the spot where he had been attacked. Sirius pinned him with a curious look.

"Are you feeling okay? Is it that thing, Flamo-dysis?"

"Flamouriadesis." James corrected under his breath, shushing his friend at the words and looking around in case anyone heard. "It affects my balance sometimes, but I'm fine."

Upon finding out his friend was okay, Sirius gave a cheery, lopsided grin that showed his canine teeth.

"Well then, where were you last night Bubble-Butt?" he asked, nudging James ribs.

After the incident of the night before, James had met up with Sirius and Peter and the boys had reported they'd made sure that Lucius and Narcissa wouldn't be pulling anything like that on Reggie again. They'd all made their way back up to Gryffindor tower and although they'd asked Reggie if he wanted Sirius to escort him back down to the Slytherin dorms Regulus had opted instead for Remus to do it, under the reasoning that he was a prefect. James didn't miss that he wasn't looking at Sirius again. It worked in James' favour however, as once Remus was done escorting the third year back to the dorm, James had snuck down with the cloak, explained things to Moony and the two had collected Severus' things for him. Remus had returned to the Gryffindor dorms, but James had ended up falling asleep at Snape's. Apparently, Sirius thought he'd gone elsewhere.

James thought for a moment about coming clean and telling the truth, but he really didn't want Sirius to think he cared about Snape more than he did. Remus was one thing, he'd never passed a bad opinion on the lanky haired Slytherin, but Sirius genuinely hated him – and James wasn't sure how to break the news that he'd spent all of last night looking after the boy.

"I don't kiss and tell." He eventually replied, deciding to go along with Sirius' assumption that he'd spent the night somewhere fun instead.

"House?" Padfoot asked.

"Not saying..." James shot back, in a sing-song voice, poking his tongue out and leading the other boy in the direction of the Great Hall. He could smell lunch wafting out through the doors, and his stomach gave a large growl of hunger even as his throat constricted at the idea of actually eating.

"Gender?" Sirius asked. James glared at him as he sat down at the Gryffindor table opposite Remus, and chose not to even bother answering that question. Sirius jumped over the other side to sit down next to the werewolf.

"So anyway, have you put any more thought it to what... um... substance we're going to use for Operation Geek Takedown?" he asked, trying to change the subject. Remus spared him an un-amused glance from across the table, looking up from his sandwiches, whilst Sirius started to tuck into a large plate of meats and cheeses.

"I don't appreciated you dubbing it so, we geeks don't need to be taken down!" Growled Remus. He wasn't actually angry, but the full moon was that night and he always found it difficult to keep in check with what was human and what was beastly in the last 24 hours leading up to the big event.

"It was your idea to get her..." James mumbled, pushing some food around his plate in an attempt to look like he was eating. His stomach growled again.

"Don't worry Love-puppy, one day you geeks will take over the world." supplied Sirius, patting him on the back.

"And one day you're infuriating pet names will catch on." replied James sarcastically.

"Of course, when Sirius and I marry and I'm ruling over you non-geeks with my iron fist, and Sirius is my darling wife, his pet names will be all the rage. If someone dislikes them, I shall make them read Shakespeare aloud for three days!" Added Remus.

James snorted. Sirius flung his arms over his wolf-like friend.

"Oh Remus-baby! Honeybunch cupcake!" he squealed, abandoning all pretense of masculinity.

"You're such a manly overlord! So full of testosterone and butch ruggedness!" he continued, snuggling into Remus neck in just the right place to make the taller boy burst into a fit of girlish giggles. Yes; Remus was insanely ticklish, and his friends liked to take advantage of that regularly. James watched with an amused smirk at his friend's antics as Peter slipped down into the chair next to him, giving Remus and Sirius a funny look.

"Well then, you two are sleeping elsewhere tonight." he commented. He reached for a roll and placed it on his plate before taking a quick look at what his friends were eating. Remus the usual sandwiches, Sirius everything under the sun, and James was just pushing things around his plate, which Pete had noticed had become a bit of a habit recently. He was about to say something when a screech interrupted the marauders antics, and an owl landed haphazardly into the fruit bowl.

James jumped at its sudden appearance, but upon noticing the usual black ribbon, carefully peeled

the parchment from its leg and allowed it to flutter off again.

The marauders watched him unroll it, but James kept it close to his chest, an odd feeling of protectiveness of the correspondence he shared with Snape rolling over him.

Eat. With company. Slowly. But eat.

"Is it an order?" Asked Remus, eyeing the parchment. James shook his head, unable to tear his eyes away from the neat cursive writing of Snape's note. Even bloodied and bruised down in his workroom he'd found the time to remind James to eat? He felt an unusually soft heat creep up behind his ears at the thought, and resolved himself to have at least three mouthfuls of porridge.

He blushed at the fruit bowl where the owl had landed, realizing the blanket of heat he was feeling in his chest was because he felt amazed that Snape was thinking about him.

"Prongs?"

James looked up into the grey eyes of a concerned werewolf. He gave a short grin.

"Yes? Oh Geeky Overlord?" he asked, which earned him a quick roll of the eyes from Remus and a particularly cheeky grin from Sirius.

"I was checking if you were okay. You were staring off into space like a walnut."

A pause engulfed the marauders.

"Walnut?" asked Peter, giving his friend an amused look. Remus ducked his head in embarrassment as Sirius gave a hearty laugh and James was just happy the attention had left him. The sandy haired teenager mumbled something against his neck, bringing a hand up to ruffle his hair in a nervous way.

"What was that Moony?" asked Sirius, even though it was obvious he had heard the werewolf, and just wanted to get Moony to tell the rest of the group.

"I got my sentences mixed..." Remus said, blushing. "It happens."

James grinned at Sirius' devilish expression.

"Yes Stud-muffin, but why did you get your sentences mixed, and say 'walnut' of all things?"

Remus glared at him.

"You bloody well know why!"

The Marauders just gave him identical innocent looks.

"FINE!" screamed the boy under scrutiny. "I'm craving them like crazy! Okay?" he all but shouted, blushing furiously at the teasing smirks his friends were adopting.

It was common knowledge to the Marauders that the closer it came to the full moon, the more tired their friend would get, the more mood-swingy he would become, and he would start craving crazy things. For example, walnuts. It amused the marauders to no end, because when Remus wasn't acting like a girl suffering from PMS, he was acting like a crazy pregnant lady without the large belly. It didn't help that Remus had a strange obsession with Chocolate: something girls were known for loving, especially when it came to their own 'monthlies'. Remus, understandably, hated the similarities, and got embarrassed whenever his friends picked up on it. The fact was that for

one night a month Remus was genuinely a blood-thirsty killing machine, and the marauders felt a great need to find some angle on it that made the whole ordeal seem less terrifying.

"It's okay sweetie. Once tonight's all over we'll sneak up to the hospital wing with some chocolate!" said Sirius, grinning like a loon at his friend. Remus grumbled obscenities, looking away awkwardly. Probably annoyed because he was about to shout and turn down chocolate. Which Remus Lupin just doesn't do. "I'm sure Poppy won't mind, as long as we bring some for her." Carried on Sirius, which earned him a silencing glare from the taller boy next to him.

"Madam Pomfrey will dislike you coming to visit me no matter how many sweets you bring to calm her. She hates the racket you cause."

"I DON'T CAUSE A RACKET!" Sirius screamed dramatically, actually standing up, with the impression he was about to throw a large, full on, magical temper tantrum. The son of Black glared meaningfully down at his companions, took a deep breath, sighed dramatically, and then sat back down. Remus rolled his eyes.

"You don't call charming the medicine bottles to sing ridiculously cheesy Muggle love songs whenever she came to check up on me a racket?"

"No." Was his short reply. Then; "It was sweet, I know she was smiling a little bit. She's too young to be so uptight. In 20 years' time, sure why not, be a bitch, but now - she's fucking hot, how can she be so... well..."

"Professional? Are you expecting her to do some sort of kinky nurse thing with you?" Remus asked, but at the idea Sirius seemed to have entered a dream-like state, so Remus decided it a great time to change the subject. "So... You okay Pete?"

Peter, who had been looking over at the doors leading to the great hall, where Lucius and Narcissa were striding in, snapped his head back to the conversation and nodded sharply.

"Of course. Hey, another owl!" he added, as another tawny landed, with more grace, in front of James. The Gryffindor looked around the hall, where people were beginning to look at him, and all the letters he was receiving. James noted the familiar black ribbon tied to its leg and unfurled the parchment once more.

Go to the store cupboard in the potions lab and fetch a Kilogram of crushed beetles' eyes. I'll need it by seven tonight. I won't be in potions class this afternoon.

James counted his lucky stars it was something so simple, and chose not to question why Snape needed the potions ingredient. Although, at the thought that it might have something to do with Wolf's Bane, his heart skipped a beat, and he realised he was having another random bout of affection for the Slytherin. Upon seeing that Remus was eyeing the parchment again with a worried look he decided to come clean.

"This is the order." He said, passing the letter around so his friends could see.

"Alright, you can go at 6 or something. Take the invisibility cloak." said Sirius once he'd read over the letter. "Surprisingly civil isn't it?" he added, flapping it about. James laughed.

"Yeah, he makes me do his dirty work and embarrasses me daily, but he's really nice about it."

Sirius gave a snort of laughter, tucking back into his eggs.

Remus had taken the note and read it over.

"Why tell you he's not going to be in class?"

James shrugged at the question. He hadn't thought about it.

"Maybe he wants me to make up some excuse for him. I could always say I beat the crap out of him for being a grease ball." replied James. Remus gave him an unimpressed look. "But then again, I can't be assed with the detention for 'threatening the health of another student merely for matters of opinion'" he added, mimicking the voice of their head of house, to such a good extent that Sirius stopped eating to make sure it wasn't actually McGonagall . Peter laughed, having dragged himself back into the conversation and stopped gazing down the hall to the Slytherin table.

"That's not a matter of opinion James, Snape is a grease ball; fact!"

James nodded his agreement, although secretly he wasn't completely convinced anymore.

Operation Geek Take-down!

It had been two weeks since Snape had given his last order. James hadn't seen him in classes the entire time, and only saw him briefly twice when he went to collect the Elixir. He got daily reminders to eat at breakfast and dinner, but even those had shortened to just the simple word 'eat'. Once James had got a completely blank piece of parchment, and the only way he knew it was from Snape was the trademark black ribbon. He'd first thought it had meant to contain an order, but it wasn't mentioned when James went to collect the Elixir at the end of the week. He had, however, told the rest of the marauders he was still getting orders – and had taken to carrying out embarrassing tasks, in order to fool them. He hadn't quite got the courage yet to explain he was relying once again on the Slytherin for encouragement to eat, and since he'd yet to help out even the slightest with the Wolf's Bane potion, he'd yet to feel he'd earned the Slytherin's daily reminders.

Today's 'order', which James had made up for himself, was to call everyone he met by something silly that wasn't their name. He'd actually had a lot of fun thinking up what people's code names could be; and since today was a very special day, he didn't think the marauders would think him too odd for it.

For today was the day they'd been waiting for, the day they commenced, Operation Geek Takedown!

James smiled down at the coin placed directly outside the Great Hall, stuck to the floor with a heavy amount of that superglue stuff. James had placed it there before breakfast that morning, and had only had a brief moment of panic where he thought he might have glued his fingers together. If Remus was correct, Lily should be walking by any minute on her prefect rounds – and of course, Remus was almost always correct.

Lily was walking up to the entrance with her friend Alice, engrossed in conversation.

The night before, Remus had talked to her for three hours straight about the qualities of coins; despite the fact it had taken him almost as many hours to even think of the qualities of coins. He came up with 'they're shiny', and 'you can buy things with them', which he repeated a lot during their conversation. Lily, of course, was too polite to tell Remus he was possibly too impressed with coins. By the end of it James was getting kind of hypnotized as well, whilst Sirius was laughing in the corner, casting charms at random intervals to make sure she was fully spellbound by coins. James didn't put it past the other boy to have aimed a few of those charms at him too. That coin looked really shiny. He shook his head to stop looking at the Sickle and stuck his finger in his ear covertly.

"Glasses to Shaggy, she's in position! Draw attention to the coin." He said under his breath. He heard Sirius' voice answer back in his ear.

"Shaggy? What the hell James?"

"What? It works... Over and out!"

"What in Merlin's name is over and out?"

James blushed, glad Sirius couldn't see him. "I saw it in a Muggle movie over the summer... Just draw attention to the bloody coin before she walks right past it!"

He saw Sirius bolt out from behind one of the many statues Hogwarts had dotted around, and slink up to Lily. Lily stopped, giving Sirius an untrusting glare. Sirius said something, which made the red head look down and stare directly at the coin the Marauders had glued to the floor. She bent down in a womanly way, bending her knees so she wasn't showing anything indecent. Sirius gave the general area a thumbs up, which he hoped James would catch from his hiding position.

James stuck his finger in his ear again. "Glasses to Pup." he whispered. Remus replied.

"Shouldn't Sirius be Pup?"

"Dammit! Why doesn't anyone like my code names?"

"Because they make no sense! Padfoot should be Pup, and I should be Shaggy, besides, we already have codenames!"

"Everyone already knows our nicknames, it's not fun if we get caught."

Remus seemed to take the insinuation that they might get caught as a personal affront.

"How dare you, have you no faith in the marauders anymore?"

"... Just shut up and do your job." James sighed, "Target is distracted, implement phase two."

"You're such a geek."

- X -

Remus was stood outside the Humped Back Old Witch Statue, keeping watch as Peter was trying to convince the cow to get outside the Statue. He had the invisibility cloak ready to throw over the animal when it eventually agreed to Pete's whims. He'd be in there himself, trying to encourage the stubborn beast; but animals had a bit of a vendetta against him because of the whole Werewolf thing. Peter emerged, leading a black and white female cow behind him. Remus flung the cloak over it and coughed noisily to hide the loud moo to passersby.

They lead the invisible cow up two or three staircases, and stopped at the 5th floor. Peter stuck his finger in his ear.

"The cow is in position."

"Nibbles?"

"..."

"NIBBLES?"

"..."

"ARE YOU OKAY? NIBBLES?"

"What the fuck James?"

"You weren't answering..."

"I was merely dumbstruck by your absolute stupidity. Really? Nibbles?"

James pouted, then stuck his tongue out childishly, even though Pete couldn't see him. He pulled his finger out of his ear, then stuck it back in.

"Glasses to Shaggy."

"Yes James?" replied Sirius, laughter evident as he watched Lily struggle to pick up the coin.

"Almost there Evans..."

"You can un-stick the coin now. The cow is in position, Pup's on his way."

"Oh god, these code names are getting worse."

"YOU LEAVE MY CODE NAMES ALONE!" James shouted, and Sirius didn't need their ear connection to hear him. 'Shaggy' pulled a flask of un-sticky potion from his robes and poured a small amount over the coin to melt the glue. Lily gave a gasp of surprise as the coin un-stuck, and then gave a cry of despair as it melted in her hand. Sirius tried unsuccessfully to hold in his laughter, and waved his wand to undo Lily's hypnotism. As she broke out of her trance she glared heatedly at the son of Black, who was shaking with laughter. She opened her mouth and was about to give a very violent description to Sirius as to exactly where he could shove his coin, when Remus rounded the corner, gasping for breath having run from the floors above.

"Lily!" he exclaimed, and gave Sirius a fake glare. "These idiots have left a cow on the fifth floor! As prefects, I believed it's our job to get this sorted out."

Lily stopped glaring at Sirius to stare incredulously at Remus instead.

"Right... erm... Yes, we should... Wait... A COW?!"

She followed the sandy haired boy upstairs, and stopped short when her sight fell on a large, black and white cow. Its tail was flicking in a way that suggesting it did not really enjoy being on the fifth floor of a magical school.

"Well, we could always levitate it... but it's rather heavy looking."

The cow gave an insulted moo.

"Yeah." agreed Remus in a non-committal way. Lily looked thoughtfully at the animal.

"Well, I'm sure we'll think of something. Damn idiots... why a cow?"

Remus heard James' voice in his ear, and coughed to hide the small static that came with this particular spell.

"Pup!" screamed James' voice, "We should call the cow Daisy!"

Remus face-palmed. "Daisy!?"

Lily turned to him, a confused expression written across her features. Remus gave a shaky laugh, waved her off, and then turned his head, as if that would make talking into his ear easier.

"Piss off James, this is a delicate operation!"

- X -

Whilst all this was going on Pete had snuck into the prefect bathroom Lily was prone to using. Each prefect had their own shower stall, which was labelled with their name. So it wasn't too hard to find Lily's. Pete took out his wand and cast a spell at the showerhead.

- X -

Remus was doing a fantabulous job of distracting Lily, James noted as he popped his head round the end of the corridor. Sirius stuck his head around as well, grinning. The Black heir stuffed his finger in his ear.

"Sirius speaking. Pete's done."

"I think you mean Shaggy to Pup." interjected James. Sirius gave him a look which clearly said 'shut up'.

"Got it... So Lily, since we're obviously not getting anywhere with this little problem..."

"It's a rather large problem Remus..."

The cow mooed.

Remus gave it a look of distrust, he'd never much got along with animals. He pushed himself into Lily's view point and said loudly:

"Have I ever told you how much I suck at Charms? You're good though right, you could teach me?"

He put an arm around her shoulder and swung her round so she was facing the other way. Lily gave him a confused look.

"Remus, you're awesome at Charms. And if you hadn't noticed we kind of have a situation."

Sirius and Peter darted forwards whilst Lily was distracted talking to Remus, leading Daisy away with the use of their newly found animal pheromones. Daisy followed happily; perhaps thinking that the boys would lead her away from his strange magical castle she had been imprisoned in. She'd completely forgotten it was Peter who had imprisoned her there in the first place. Lily went to turn around just as they were darting out of sight, and in a desperate attempt at distracting her for a moment longer Remus shouted:

"We should call her Daisy!"

Lily looked at Remus for a long while, whilst James around the corner whispered an excited 'yes Moony!'. Lily evidently decided that her fellow fifth year prefect was losing it.

"That's great Remus but we still need to get rid of it. I really think a levitation spell is the best way to go." Lily said, turning and laying her eyes on Daisy the cow. Except, Daisy was no longer Daisy, but a mixture of dung bombs and pouches of goo that James had quickly transfigured to look like Daisy. Lily aimed her wand at the fake cow. Remus braced himself for what was to come by quickly muttering a deflection spell over himself. Lily muttered to herself as she gave her wand a swish and flick.

"Wingardium Leviosa"

Daisy blew up.

Lily instantly found herself covered in foul smelling, sticky green goo. Remus had stayed remarkably clean, as almost all of what was supposed to hit him had been deflected by his spell and was instead on Lily.

"Lupin! WHAT AM I COVERED IN?"

Remus grinned. "I would call it sludge."

Lily glared heatedly, she pointed her wand at herself and muttered a cleaning spell, but it did nothing to rid her of the smell. She stomped off towards the prefect bathroom. Remus congratulated himself on a job well done.

James, Sirius and Peter ran towards him, identical grins on their Marauder faces.

"This is going to be epic... So Sirius has some drinking to do!" James sung, nudging his friend. Sirius adopted a disgusted expression, thinking of having to down the potion. He almost always drew the short end of the straw when it came to drinking polyjuice potion; he was the best at mimicking other people's voices.

"Yeah yeah..." He sighed, trudging off towards the dungeons, where Pete and Remus had been making a Polyjuice Potion over the last month.

"You got her hair earlier right?" Remus asked, Sirius nodded.

"I yanked it out when Lily was battling with the Sickle."

Remus grimaced, thinking of his friend being so blunt.

"What did she say?"

"She asked what I'd be using it for. I said I'd sell it on eBay."

"...What's eBay?"

Sirius shrugged, walking off.

- X -

Lily walked out of her second shower, fuming and storming around. She'd taken one shower in her prefect shower stall, only to find herself dirtier once she left than when she went in. Which was a pretty mean feat considering how much she'd been covered in sludge. She pouted as Alice came up to her, smiling innocently.

"Hey Alice..." she sighed. Alice's smile grew, sliding up to her.

"Hey Lily." she replied.

"You got a cold Alice?" asked Lily.

"... Yeah." Alice replied, coughing for effect. Lily gave a sympathetic pat to the shoulder, not really in the mood for comforting other people when she'd had such a crap day, thanks to a bunch of Gryffindor trouble makers. Alice smiled reassuringly. "Here." she said, handing over a neatly wrapped sweet.

"What's this?" the redhead asked, studying the gift. Alice coughed again.

"It's a sweet, you've had such a bad day, I thought you'd need this before you go into that exam. It'll get your sugars back up." She replied. Lily smiled thankfully at her friend, popping the sweet into her mouth and sucking.

"Thanks Alice." she replied, shoving the sweet to the side of her cheek with her tongue. Alice just grinned, coughing again.

"You really should get something for that cough." said Lily, before rushing off towards the exam she had. Alice nodded, before running quickly in the opposite direction. She rounded the corner and ran straight into three out of four Marauders.

"How'd it go?" asked James.

"I hate being a girl." said Alice in Sirius' voice. "But she took it, no problem. I say hooray for hiccup sweets! Old Zonko's got the right idea with the shop of his. We should start one up!"

James nodded his agreement. Remus grinned.

"Operation Geek Takedown completed!"

Help

Severus sat on the black sofa, back against the arm rest and knees drawn up; a roll of parchment resting on the large, hardback book that was resting on his knees. He used one hand to hold the book and parchment steady, the other was delicately holding an old quill that's feather was rather crumpled. The tip, nevertheless, was clean and sharp; he'd sharpened it before he'd sat down to write. He didn't want his ink to come out fat and blotted.

Of course, the real problem was actually thinking up some intelligent thing to write. It seemed that whenever he sat down to put quill to parchment, his mind went blank and after a while of not being able to write anything, he would give up and retreat back to flipping through his books on werewolves, or preparing the Elixir for when Potter would come to pick it up each week. Two weeks had passed since he'd last given the Gryffindor an order. He wasn't even going to classes anymore, favouring hollowing himself in his workroom and working determinedly at his projects. It stopped him from feeling the stares of hatred he received from almost everyone who passed him in the corridor, but while hard work on things he liked, in a safe place, was all good and dandy, it was starting to get a little lonely. He was starting to look forward to the moments Potter would visit to collect his potion, if only for that brief amount of human company that didn't seem to despise him completely. Which was completely absurd, for this was Potter we were talking about!

He stood and shuffled round the room, looking over his possessions, which had been placed with care about the studio when Severus had been too bruised to move himself. Why was Potter acting so... nice, all of a sudden? Was it because of Cinis? He knew the disease could create heavy mood-swings, but almost always swung people towards anger, not remorse, or kindness. It had been a couple of years since the original creator of the Glacier Elixir had passed, and Severus had been told at the time that he had surpassed him in competency, but there were still times the young Slytherin wished he could ask the questions they still didn't know about Flamouriades. His old mentor had been a true scholar of the disease, and had journals after journals filled with notes on it – Severus had inherited those journals in his will, and had scoured their lengths in search of answers. However, there was always going to be more questions.

He snapped his head in the direction of his door when he heard a crash. There were muffled voices coming from outside, down the corridor. Severus would guess they were in the classroom, behind the store shelf. The walls down in the dungeons weren't thin, but they were filled with gaps where wind whistled through and voices could travel by echoes, so he wasn't surprised that he could hear them.

"Fuck..."

... Curiosity killed the cat Severus. He told himself, eyes fixed on his plain wooden door. But then again, satisfaction bought it back... He crossed the room, quietly opened the door and tiptoed down the corridor to outside the revolving store shelves, so that he might hear more clearly.

"You going to puke?"

"... No..." someone coughed violently, and Severus got the impression that they were lying, and they really were going to be sick. He hoped they wouldn't, if they did he might be able to smell it from his workroom, and that was not something he wanted.

"Wow, don't you look pretty." said somebody. Severus thought he recognised the voice, but being hollowed up in a dungeon tended to screw up your senses. There was a small silence, then:

"Shut up you dork."

"Just commenting."

"What, you like Alice?"

Another silence followed, and the question wasn't answered, so Severus could only assume that it was answered with a nod or shake of the head.

There was a short laugh, followed by;

"What's wrong with Alice?"

So Severus could assume the answer was that the other boy did not 'like' Alice. The other boy answered, an awkward hint to his voice.

"I don't know. Nothing I guess. Just... I've been thinking a lot about what my type is, and I don't think she's it."

"Well, you know what your type is." Replied the other voice. "Evans."

There was a short non-committal hum at the response, but it seemed to be good enough for whoever was on the other side of the door, as the next thing Severus heard was a door swing open and shut again. He waited a few minutes in case the boys hadn't left, but upon hearing no more voices he pushed his way through the store shelf and into the classroom.

There were some remains of a potion left in a small cauldron just outside his workroom. He sniffed at it.

"Polyjuice potion?" he asked himself and the empty room. Weren't Polyjuice potions getting forbidden? They only learnt about them in seventh year, and the ministry was getting all up-in-arms about how dangerous it could be. Of course, that hadn't stopped Severus trying it out in his workroom, which was how he could recognize its remains. The boy sighed to the deserted room, rubbing his temples thoughtfully, before turning back to return to his workroom. Whoever had brewed this, although they'd made a good attempt, was going to have a shock in an hour or so. He pushed his way back into the corridor leading to his work room. It wasn't his problem.

- X -

"Guys?"

James whipped round at Sirius' timid comment, and came face to face with the cubicle door. He knew something was wrong. Sirius never said anything in a timid way, but that little word had sounded for all the world like a scared little boy. Sirius was inside the cubicle, changing out of Alice's clothes from his adventure as a woman; he'd taken awhile because he'd had to change back first.

"What is it Pads?"

"Erm... how long has it been?" asked the voice on the other side of the door. James looked to Remus, who checked his watch.

"About half an hour now you mention it. You okay?" said the sandy-haired boy. Pete, who was sitting by the sinks, swinging his legs, stopped swinging. They'd been talking so animatedly about how well their prank had gone that they hadn't noticed how long Sirius had spent in the cubicle. It

was way past the hour Polyjuice potion allowed.

"Erm... well..." said Sirius, and James heard some shuffling, "I haven't changed back." the boy stated, coming out the cubicle. He looked like Alice, though he was dressed in Sirius' clothes, which were swimming on her. James rose an eyebrow.

"Evidently." said Remus, checking his watch again. Pete hopped down off the counter where the sinks were, and came over to check Sirius out.

"What do we do then?" he asked, once he'd checked the boy over. Sirius squirmed under the scrutinising. James pulled up a hand and ruffled his hair thoughtfully. Why would Sirius not change back? What happened? If only he knew more about potions. If only they knew someone who knew a lot about potions...

"Well... I happen to know a guy." James ventured, wincing at his own train of thought. It would never work. Even if he did agree, it didn't mean Sirius would!

"If you're thinking Snape I-"

"Here me out! Snape's good at potions! Really good!" he justified. "I know without a doubt he'll know how to fix this." he added, wanting to tell them all about the Wolf's Bane potion and how adept Snape really was when it came to brewing. Sirius just glared.

"I know you guys are all buddy-like now, but I'm not! I'd rather call our own bluff and see Poppy Pomphrey then go to that grease-ball for help!"

Remus sighed. Pete bowed his head. James glared at his so-called best friend.

"You mean like I have to every week?" he asked, clenching his fists. Sirius faltered.

"I didn't... Jamie..."

"Don't 'Jamie' me like I'm some sort of docile kid! I'm trying to help and you reject it and then rub in my face how absolutely helpless my situation has become! Do you think I freaking like having to depend on that jerk?"

Sirius crossed the room and placed a hand on his friends shoulder.

"I'm sorry Prongs. That was harsh of me. I know you can't like it."

James crossed his arms, but let a very small smile grace his lips. At least being terminally ill meant he could get some pity-apologies out of Sirius every now and again.

"I guess I can forgive you. But you better come with me. I'm not joking about Snape being good at potions. I'm sure he can fix you up."

Sirius, despite obviously still being against the idea, let James drag him out of the bathroom they were currently inside, and down off towards the dungeons; leaving Remus and Pete in their wake.

"When did James learn the word docile?" Remus wondered aloud.

- X -

"Stay in the classroom!"

"Dammit Jamie why?"

"Because I said so. And stop calling me that."

Snape groaned, sitting up from where he was laying on the sofa and giving the door of his workroom his most death-threatening glare. Who dare disturb the small amount of peace he'd actually been able to find since he'd had the daylights beaten out of him by a bunch of angry Slytherins a couple of weeks prior? Did they not know that this was the first time he'd been able to sleep without worrying he might stop breathing if he did? He almost had a heart attack as the door burst open and James stumbled in, muttering curses. As it was, though, he simply rose an eyebrow.

"Snape!" James semi-shouted, earning him a glare from the Slytherin. "Sirius needs your help..." he added, in a much smaller voice, staring intently at the floor. Snape rolled his eyes.

"Seems that's a common theme with you Gryffindors." He didn't miss James clenching his fists. "What has the idiot done this time?" he asked, brushing over the surprised but happy look James shot him at his interest.

"Well, he took some Polyjuice potion to turn him into Alice... err, don't ask why, and then he couldn't turn back!"

Snape rose his eyebrow again, how had he not guessed the remains he'd seen earlier had been a direct result of the stupid marauders and their pranks.

"And where is he now?"

"In our classroom... I wouldn't let him come down here, though he gave me grief about it."

Snape wasn't quite sure if James wanted to be patted on the head or something; the way he proudly proclaimed how he'd managed to keep Snape's workroom a secret from his friends made him seem like a puppy who wanted praise from its master. He smirked at the idea, wondering whether Potter genuinely thought of him as a master.

"Show me the damage." He said, standing and passing James by as he went to the door, but as he came to the door he stopped, looking back over his shoulder at James; who was staring at his cauldrons with a strange look. "What is it?"

James jumped, spinning round and shaking his head, he swayed slightly on the spot.

"N- Nothing!" he protested, then walked forward, pushing Snape out the door and down the corridor. "Sirius will think I've died if we're too long."

Snape closed his mouth, having been about to ask if James was feeling okay. The fumes in the dungeons from the potions were particularly furious where Snape had been hollowed down there, working on them for so long. They may have overpowered the boy suffering from Cinis. But James was pushing him forwards towards the ingredients shelf at the end of the corridor, and seemed to be fine.

Once they entered the classroom the first thing they saw was Alice was sitting on one of the desks; legs swinging over the edge. Or rather, Sirius was. The boy looked in their direction, and tried to stop his automatic glare in the presence of the Slytherin. Snape rolled his eyes and strode across the room, studying Sirius intently. The Gryffindor tried not to squirm. He hated being looked at so thoroughly.

"I think... yes..." Snape muttered as he looked at the boy in Alice's body. "Do you still have the remains of the potion?"

James nodded, then went to retrieve it from where they'd left the remains of the polyjuice potion. He handed the small potion over to Snape, who shifted his attention to that.

"As I originally expected..." The Slytherin muttered. "Go get some Knotgrass, and some Sneezewort. While you're at it, get some Stinksap and Dittany." The Slytherin instructed, setting up a cauldron and prodding a flame into life underneath it. Sirius watched as James obediently went into the store room cupboard and came out with a pot of Knotgrass, a pot of Dittany and some Sneezewort, without a word.

"I'll have to go to the greenhouses to get the Stinksap..." James trailed off, putting the ingredients on the desk Sirius was at, on the other side of the room from where Snape was working. Sirius cocked his head at the strange decision.

"Fine. Black! Bring those ingredients to me. Get to the greenhouses Potter." James nodded, rushing out of the classroom, and Sirius stood up, bring the ingredients closer to Snape. "You can help with this Black, since you're the one who got yourself in this situation." Snape said, using an abandoned scalpel to cut up the knotgrass. Sirius pulled the Dittany closer.

"Crush it?" he asked, and started when he got the nod from Snape. Three minutes later, Snape had cut up 10 grams of Knotgrass, and Sirius had crushed 5 grams of Dittany. James rushed back into the classroom, carrying a container of Stinksap and covering his nose. Snape went to meet him and snatched the container, waving James away and depositing the contents of it into his cauldron, closely followed by 13 grams of pure Sneezewort, which bubbled and fizzed and dissolved. The potion was a sickly yellow colour. Severus sprinkled in the Dittany with a careful deliberateness, and stirred five times anti-clockwise. The potion turned to a sludgy brown, and looked as thick as jelly. Snape stirred again and added the Knotgrass carefully. The potion lost some of its viscosity.

"Just let it simmer for about 20 minutes and it'll be done." The boy said, "In the future could you attempt not to drag me in to your pathetic problems?"

Sirius bowed his head, and went to join James at the back of the room. James gave him a shaky smile, despite his legs suddenly feeling incredibly shaky. Was it just him, or was it very stuffy in here? He could even smell the fumes from the potion on the other side of the room.

"Thanks." Sirius said, facing the wall. But both James and Snape could tell it was addressed to the Slytherin. James was going to tell Sirius that it was the right thing to do, and well done for being the better man and all that, but unfortunately, it was about then that he lost consciousness.

Information

When James awoke it was to a pounding headache. He just barely opened his eyes to slits to take in his surroundings, and let said slits rest on Sirius, who was sitting next to where he was laying, fast asleep. Although James didn't have his glasses on and the world around him was blurry, Sirius was close enough that James could see he had frown lines across his usually smooth forehead, and was slouched heavily in his chair. James moved his eyes, widening them a little further, to try and figured out where he was.

The room was dark and had a smell common to hospitals, and the drapes hanging semi-closed around the bed he was lying in gave away that James was in the Medical Wing. The messy haired boy sat up in bed, trying his best to ignore the pain in his head, and felt around for his glasses. Locating them, he slipped them on, and momentarily reveled in the fact he was able to see again. That was, until he heard a stumble outside his semi-drawn curtains, and was instantly on edge.

He grabbed around for his wand, and when the curtains were pulled back he was ready; pointing it towards the intruder and thinking up the best curse to use. His mind pulled up no results, however, when he came wand to face with Severus Snape.

"Put your wand away Potter." The Slytherin hissed, stepping into the small, dark area and placing down a bottle of something foul looking next to Sirius' sleeping form. The Slytherin glared down at James. "How do you feel?" he asked, a slight edge to his voice that betrayed how ridiculous he felt asking that question. James nodded dumbly, shuffling to put his wand away. His body felt like it was on fire, and he was slightly afraid to admit that he knew the sensation all too well.

"Fine." he responded, voice raspy and dehydrated. Snape pulled up a chair next to Sirius; something which was so strange that when James glanced at it, he had to look again. But sure enough, Snape was sitting next to Sirius like it was an everyday occurrence. Sirius may have had something to say about it if he were awake – but James got the impression it was well past curfew, and Sirius had had a long battle with Pomphrey in order to stay and look out for his friend in the medical wing during the night.

"Do you feel dizzy, sensitive or hot?" Asked the Slytherin, leaning forward slightly in his chair. The lanky-haired boy gave a yawn, covering his mouth as James coughed, wary to admit he felt like he was going up in flames.

"Do I look hot?" he asked, trying to sound scathing and knowing he was failing miserably.

"Yes." Was his short reply. James chuckled lightly, despite the vibrations going through his head and intensifying his headache.

"I always thought you had a thing for me." He replied jokingly, before realising what he'd said and blushing; avoiding eye-contact. Luckily, Snape decided to let his cocky comment slip, possibly because he looked too tired to think of a scathing comeback.

"Here." He said stiffly, shoving the vial he'd brought in with him into James' hands. The boy took it with a slight fumbling, and stared at it with a look of pure disgust. It was yellow.

"If this is that Love Potion..."

"It's not." Interrupted Snape, it was obvious he could barely hide his amused smirk at James' comment. "You drank all that. This should stop your fever," he added. James shot a slightly disgruntled look between Snape and the potion, and ultimately decided that it must be trustworthy, as he uncorked it and gulped it down. He shivered and scraped his teeth along his tongue to try and rid it of some of the disgusting taste.

"It's awful." He said, and was met with silence. Snape, obviously exhausted, had fallen asleep in his chair. James gave himself the privilege of sending the lanky haired boy a soft smile. Since there was no one there who could see him. No one who was awake anyway.

"Prongs?"

James jumped out of his skin, swiveling his gaze towards where his curtains were slightly open. However, there wasn't anybody there. James bit his lip, glancing back at his sleeping companions. He was certain he'd heard something. But there was no one there, and Snape and Sirius were both still soundly asleep. Then he heard a loud crash on the other side of the room, which had him diving under the covers. Not that he'd ever admit it to anyone, for he was a Gryffindor after all, but Hogwarts was an old castle full of ghosts and things that went bump in the night, and he'd read one too many Muggle horror stories to fully ignore them all.

He emerged from underneath the white duvet the Medical Wing supplied, and shot Sirius and Snape another look, before throwing away the covers and stepping out onto the cold floor. He was barefoot and it sent shivers right through him, but he continued to feel dizzy as he stumbled his way towards the curtains. Snape's painkiller wasn't doing as much good as it had done in the past.

He dragged his feet out of the Medical Wing and looked around the surrounding area. He spotted the swish of someone's robes as they rounded the corner, and made his way after them, determined to find out who it was, and whether they'd seen his interaction with Snape. He got to the corner and steadied himself against it. The mysterious person was already out of sight. There was no way he'd ever catch up to him. Besides, he still felt inhumanely hot.

He struggled down the dark hallway; sweating and stumbling and keeping his hand on the wall to keep himself upright. The heat was getting incredibly intense again, and he wasn't entirely sure where he was going, now that he obviously wasn't following the mystery stranger anymore. Before he knew it, he'd made his way down to the entrance hall, though he wasn't entirely sure how he'd managed to get down the stairs. His vision was beginning to go blurry.

It was fairly obvious now, that he shouldn't have left the Medical Wing. He was in desperate need to medical attention. He hated to admit it, but he was burning up. He needed someone to help. He'd come to depend on Snape being there with his little miracle cures, yet now where was Snape? Back in the Medical Wing. And he'd snuck out to go chase after some random person he didn't even know. Really, he'd brought this upon himself. And it was so, so hot again. And this time, Snape wasn't there to help him out.

He stumbled out of the great doors which lead to the outside. It was a fairly cool night, with rain clouds threatening to spill. Yet it did nothing to cool him.

He fell to his knees, slamming his palms into the ground to try and break his fall. Mud sprayed up into his face, and he felt something snap in wrist; the result of the angle his wrist connected with

the ground at. It was accompanied by a sickening crack. Pain shot up his arm, but it was barely noticeable compared to his high fever. He painfully slowly stood back up, hacking dryly and cradling his arm against his chest. He was only very faintly aware of any sort of movement behind him, and then he moved on towards the forest, and Hagrid's hut, in a hopes of finding someone he could lean upon for a few minutes.

"James?" Came the faint shout in the distance from a voice that was vaguely familiar to him. It was coarse, presumably from shouting. "James?" the voice asked again, much closer now, and James realised that the owner of the voice must be right beside him. The voice was breathy, like he'd been running. Was someone that worried about him? James thought offhandedly as he slipped in and out of awareness. He looked towards where he thought the voice was coming from, yet found his vision was too blurry to even see the outline of whom ever it was.

The next moment he found himself, once again, rushing towards the ground at an alarming rate, and cradled his wrist protectively, faintly remembering what had happened last time he'd found himself in that situation. He knew he was mere centimetres from the ground when strong arms wrapped themselves around him securely, breaking his fall and drawing him into a lightly muscled chest. He felt himself being lifted up, and supported with ease, as if he was nothing more than a kitten. Yet, he couldn't find the strength in him to thank his saviour. He felt a jog as he was rearranged in the man's arms and was carried back into the castle.

"I'm sorry James... This is all my fault." He heard as he slipped into unconsciousness.

They had just made it back into the castle when it started to rain.

- X -

The mysterious stranger walked as quietly as he could down the hallway, walking fast so as not to be caught up by the boy he knew to be following him. Not that he really needed to walk so fast, he realised, as the boy was barely able to keep himself conscious, let alone be an effective tail. Really, it was pitiful.

He turned the corner; pulling his wand from his pocket and lighting the dark area. He was on the fourth floor, so took the short-cut behind the tapestry down to the entrance hall, and crossed the hall with an air of arrogance. He flung open the large doors and stepped out into the cool night, only to duck behind some large bushes minutes later when the doors were opened again; this time with nowhere near as much force.

His shadow from earlier stumbled out, looking flushed and dizzy. How had he'd got down to the ground floor so quickly? Even if he knew some short-cuts, in his condition it seemed impossible that he could get from one end of the hallway to the other without collapsing.

"Gryffindor? I thought we said not to bring your stupid friends."

The mystery man squeaked, turning round to lay his eyes on a tall man with long blonde hair. Lucius Malfoy.

"I didn't!" The boy protested. "He followed me here! Besides, in his condition he can barely stand. He won't find us." he added, looking at his feet. Behind Lucius was Narcissa, checking over her nails as if she was bored with the whole scene. She looked up at his words.

"He managed to follow you here didn't he?" She said, looking over his shoulder at James – who had just fallen to the floor and let out a pitiful sob.

"Yes, but..."

"Enough." Broke in Lucius, glaring down at the Gryffindor. "What information do you have for us?"

Peter Pettigrew swilled his gaze to look at where James had been standing, then turned back to the Slytherins.

"This is... this is all to help us all, the marauders, stay close?" He asked, although he'd asked it many times before. Lucius nodded along anyway. Peter cleared his throat. "James is ill. He needs to depend on Snivellus to keep him well."

As he spoke the two Slytherins were watching over his shoulder at where Severus Snape was striding out of the castle purposefully, shouting as he went, calling for the Gryffindor. They watched as he found James, caught him round the middle as he was once again falling to the dirt, and lifted him up in his arms – carrying him back into the castle like a groom carrying his bride over the threshold.

They looked down at Peter again.

"Well done Gryffindor – this will help a lot."

- X -

"Prongs? Prongsie? James! What the hell did you do Snape?" Asked a voice James knew he recognized.

James felt himself being deposited down onto a soft bed, and the blankets being drawn up around him. Then his head was tilted up and something disgusting was tipped down his throat. He didn't have the strength to complain, and this person had looked after him so far, so he just swallowed.

"What happened?" Asked the same voice, anger laced in his tone at being ignored, and James heard a mumbled reply. "What was that?" The voice asked.

"I said I gave him the wrong potion. I'm sorry." Someone replied. James faintly registered that this person must be the person who had carried him and looked after him. He let a tiny smile grace his lips. The person seemed annoyed and awkward at saying what he did. He got the feeling 'sorry' wasn't a word that was used very often by his saviour.

"So what? You gave him the right potion now right? He's going to be okay?"

"He'll be fine."

James heard someone let out a huge sigh of relief, and the scraping of chairs as his two companions sat down. He still couldn't bring himself to open his eyes.

"Thanks... You know... For going to get him."

James mustered another smile. It seemed both his companions were awkward around each other. Yet here they were, together, because of him. Was that supposed to make him happy or sad? He couldn't quite tell, he decided, as he slipped back into unconsciousness.

Mummy's Boy

James woke up in his own bed up in Gryffindor dorms, surrounded by his covers but not under them. He quickly pulled them up around his chin and curled his legs into himself; no longer feeling hot, but rather, freezing cold. He glanced around the room to see each of his roommates doing the same, and found out that the reason for their goosebumps was because of the open window.

He stood up and crossed the room, shivering as his feet connected with the cold wooden floorboards, and sealed the window closed. He stood by it and fiddled with the latch as he thought about the day before. He couldn't help but wonder what had happened. He could barely remember a thing of yesterday, except he knew when he'd awoken in the Medical Wing a second time, Sirius and Snape weren't talking. Which in itself wasn't odd, but it was more of the fact they weren't slinging insults at each other – and of course that Snape had stuck around to see him wake up at all. It was Tuesday that day, so he couldn't understand why he'd had such a harsh reaction to potion fumes the day before. He'd taken the potion Snape had given him on Friday, had been eating little amounts daily and had barely been around unfinished potions. He glanced back up at the window he was playing with when a large tawny owl was attempting to hover outside, giving him an impatient look.

He opened the window he'd just closed, took the letter, and shooed the hungry looking animal away, closing the window again. He dragged his feet back over to his bed with the parchment in hand – subconsciously dropping the black ribbon in his bedside draw with a lot of its friends, and plopped himself down, readying himself to read what Snape had to say. It had been awhile since he'd received an order, and oddly, he kind of missed the challenge.

Call your professors 'mummy' or 'daddy' throughout the day. Do not tell your friends what you are doing. Do not attempt to not talk to your teachers. Call them it at least once during every class.

The letter ended abruptly and James felt himself go red in the face. 'mum' or 'dad', he could probably do with minimal embarrassment – pretty much all of the marauders had called McGonagall 'mum' at one point – but there was something very different about 'mummy' and 'daddy'. That was what toddlers, or pretentious rich kids called their parents. This was going to be an embarrassing one.

"Letter?" Asked Peter, sitting up in bed and yawning widely. James nodded, glancing at his friend. It was strange that he was up before Pete; the known early riser. Had the boy been up late the night before or something? James couldn't really remember a thing. "What's it about?" The other boy asked, cracking his shoulder bones with a pop and click. James shook his head slightly.

"Nothing important. Just my parents reminding me not to get expelled or anything." He replied, thinking fast. He shot Pete a smile. "You know how parents are. Always worried you're going to blow something up or turn the headmaster bald."

Pete gave a short snort of amusement, presumably at the image of a bald Dumbledore, before dragging himself out of bed and slipping into his school clothes.

"Your parents seem like real riots," he offhandedly commented, looking at the wall above James' head before shuffling out of the dormitory and into the little bathroom they all shared. James shrugged to no-one in particular.

"At least that's got his mind thinking that my mind's thinking about parents... good excuse James." He congratulated himself, shuffling around the room, glancing at this and that and trying to wake himself up, without waking anyone else up. He made his way down the spiral staircase, and into the common room after he'd changed into his school uniform, and deigned himself presentable.

He joined the early risers in the common room, and kept himself as just a bystander. He wanted to be invisible today, so he could do this task with minimal embarrassment. Since that's what Snape was after, wasn't it? James' embarrassment. Really, the Slytherin was nice one minute, helping them out with the Sirius/Alice thing, and making sure James was okay in the hospital – and then back to being a total bastard the next.

- X -

"Jamie, Jamie, Jamie... James, Jay, Jay-Jay, Jimmy, Jim, Jim-bob, Darling, Love, Sweetheart, Sweetie-pie, Honey, Pumpkin, Pumpkin-pie, Gorgeous, Babe, Cupcake, Cupcake-pie -"

"Merlin's beard Sirius will you shut up!" Shouted James.

Sirius did as he was told, sinking slightly lower in his seat at James' yell. He pouted at his Transfiguration notes. Transfiguration was fine and all, they all liked it as a subject and excelled at it, but James seemed to have this unearthly need to be best in the class at it. It was the only time during the school day when James Potter went from trouble-maker extraordinaire, creator of the Marauders, to biggest geek in the class. Sirius had always somewhat assumed it was because he and McGonagall connected over Quidditch on more than a few occasions, but he couldn't deny it had come in handy when the three of them had been attempting to illegally become animagi.

"I was only trying to get your attention Mr. Grumpy-pants." He said sourly, glaring at his friend turned transfiguration-nerd. James rolled his eyes, adjusting his glasses as he looked down at the notes he'd been taking on McGonagall's lecture.

"You're such a drama-queen, as soon as someone isn't paying attention to you, you hate it." He whispered under his breath, not even sparing Sirius a glance as he crossed out a spelling error and corrected it. "And you know I hate being called Jamie!"

Sirius gave a large, fake gasp, and James knew before it had even begun that Sirius was about to throw one of his infamous little rants that pretty much always landed them in trouble.

"I'm insulted that you would even think such a thing of me, your best friend for life, and partner in crime. HOW COULD YOU!? How could you betray my trust like that? You... you - You fiend! I've never, in my life, never felt so let down! How could you rather listen to that old witch than listen to me? ME? How could Transfiguration be worthy of your attention? How could Transfiguration catch your beautiful eyes, yet I, Sirius Black, best friend and sex god, get left to be shoved in the corner. Nobody puts baby in a corner! Is it that you only want to use me? Am I only good for a laugh? Some fun? IS THAT ALL I AM TO YOU?!"

"Sirius Black! Report to me for a detention after classes today!" Interrupted McGonagall, looking down at him with thin lips. Sirius pouted.

"Professor! That's so unfair! It was Jamie's fault!"

"Was not!"

"I expect to see you there too Potter."

This was it, this was his chance to get in on Snape's order. He didn't even share this class with the Slytherins but he had to make it big so it would eventually get back to Snape. He took a deep breath, knowing how embarrassing it was going to be and:

"But - mummy!"

James blushed bright red. Snape got his fucking embarrassment he thought, as Sirius and the rest of the class fell into a deadly silence, before they all burst out laughing.

"I don't care what name you want to give me Potter. I still expect you in detention." McGonagall spoke, but James could see even she was smiling slightly.

- X -

"Way I hear it, you were just thinking about that letter you got this morning, and everyone knows you're a bit of a mummy's boy," said Pete, later that day. James flushed a little at the explanation.

"I am not a mummy's boy!" He squeaked, but Sirius was chuckling.

"Oh I dunno, Reggie and I grew up in a posh household, and even we don't call our mother 'mummy'." He supplied. James knew it was true, and it wasn't like he called his mother 'mummy'. Okay so there might have been the odd occasion where he let it slip through, but his parents were older – they had a more traditional set of values and usually calling them something cute went a long way to getting whatever it was that James wanted.

In any case, James had managed to complete Snape's task in every lesson so far; Transfiguration; Potions - where he'd called Slughorn 'daddy' when he'd been called over to discuss his essay. Slughorn had chuckled and asked if he reminded James of his father, leaving James feeling oddly sickened; Charms - He'd called Flitwick 'daddy' as everyone was distracted by what they were supposed to be charming, and Flitwick had come about to help out. James wasn't even sure Flitwick had noticed, let alone everyone else; and Muggle Studies, which he'd just come out of, calling Professor Jed 'daddy' in front of the whole class when asked to give a presentation on families. He figured it was a VERY good excuse.

However, Sirius was still cracking up about Transfiguration.

"You're taking this way over board. I know for a fact that you call your father 'daddy' sometimes." He replied. Sirius stopped laughing.

"That's different." He mumbled.

"How so?" James asked.

"Because he still calls his dad daddy."

James shrugged, sipping at his pumpkin juice, smirking slightly.

"So you're a whole family of pretentious brats?" He teased.

"Well, I'd rather be a daddy's boy than a mummy's boy" Sirius replied. "Anyway, why are you so grumbly about it? Annoyed about the detention?"

"Yes." Was James' short reply. Sirius gave a very quiet sigh, took a swig of his own pumpkin juice and patted James on the back.

"Come on sweetcheeks." He said, and James cringed at Sirius' nickname. He was certain they were getting worse. "You know its better when both of us are in detention. It's almost fun!" Sirius winked at him. James blew bubbles into his pumpkin juice.

"It's McGonagall though." He said quietly, stopping blowing bubbles and staring morosely at the cup. "She won't let us have fun. She'll probably make us do things on opposite ends of the castle."

At this, Remus jumped in, looking excited.

"That's right!" He said, almost triumphantly, "I've been meaning to tell you." He paused for what James could only assume was dramatic effect. Except the pause dragged on too long, and Sirius was forced to say;

"Go on."

Remus grinned. "No wait! I want you to be really excited about this!"

"We can't be excited if we don't know what it is!" James snapped, patience wearing thin. The familiar flick of flames danced in his stomach, but he pushed them down.

Remus grinned some more, then reached into his pocket and pulled out two mirrors.

"I made these, for you two. You can use them during detention." He said, placing one down in front of James and one in front of Sirius. Sirius laughed.

"Aww doll-face! A present? For ME?"

Remus and James simultaneously raised their eyes to the heavens.

"They're communication mirrors. Two way." Explained Remus, picking Sirius' up. "Here, I'll show you."

He lent forward a little and muttered James' name. James mirror lit up with Remus face.

"See, we can talk through the mirror, no matter how far away you are." Said Remus, and a second or two later, the mirror repeated it. "Okay, so it isn't perfect yet." Remus added, then the mirror repeated it. James and Sirius, both lent over James' mirror, stared at it in shock and admiration. Sirius looked up and caught eyes with Remus.

"I fucking LOVE you."

Remus looked away, coughing.

"Yes, yes, I know." He replied. Then an owl swooped down, skimming his head and making Remus duck, landing on the table right where James was sat. James groaned. Post was ages ago.

"Order, do you reckon?" asked Remus, giving the owl a reproachful looking, presumably for almost taking his head off. James shrugged, also giving the barn owl a reproachful look, it couldn't be an order because he'd already had one today, and he never got reminders to eat at lunch, but the black ribbon was there so it was definitely from Snape. He lent forward and detached the letter. The owl flew off, perhaps to go catch a mouse, before heading off for some sleep.

He opened the letter carefully, and read it to himself, not really wanting the other marauders to

know what it said.

Don't bother with the rest of the order, it's not as entertaining as I'd hoped. If you want to help me with the Wolf's Bane potion, you should come to me after dinner tonight.

James swallowed. His first chance to prove to Snape that he really wanted to help with this potion, and he was in detention. How could he prove to Snape that he was a good person, if the first time the Slytherin gave him a chance, he couldn't even turn up? He shook his head. He'd have to send an owl the next time he got a chance, if he got the chance, and hopefully Snape wouldn't mind him coming an hour later. He doubted McGonagall would keep him passed the hour.

"Order?" Asked Peter.

"Nah." James replied, smiling. "Now tell me more about these mirrors Moony."

Excuses

James wiped the same silver shield for what felt like near-on the millionth time. The afternoon had stretched long, and had been overly busy - James had never got the chance to send an owl, and was worried now that Snape might feel stood-up. His mirror was set on the side, slightly out of sight in case McGonagall walked back in and confiscated it. It flashed momentarily and James picked it up; checking the nearest clock to find the time. Seven at night, he was completely late if he wanted to help Snape. He looked into his new mirror and saw Sirius' face instead of his own. It was a little grainy, and kept jumping, but overall, it was an amazing piece of magic.

"Hey Jamie." Said Sirius' voice, making James growl at the nickname. How many times did he have to tell them? The background behind him looked like just another classroom to James, so he couldn't tell where McGonagall had placed his friend.

"Hey Siri." He replied sarcastically, wiping at the shield again, trying to get one stubborn stain to go. Sirius grinned on the other end of the mirror.

"McGonagall says I'm done, so I'm off."

James swore.

"That's so unfair! I didn't even deserve this! I had plans for tonight!" James growled at the mirror. Sirius snorted amusedly, and James saw his body shift so he was sat down, more comfortably.

"Tell me more kiddo." Demanded the teen, "a date?"

James blushed heavily, though not entirely sure why, and wiped forcefully at the shield, working out his frustrations on it, until the stain disappeared.

"Not a date." James said, clearing his throat a little. "Just..."

"Snivellus?" Sirius guessed, making James cough some more. Sirius shrugged and sighed. "You said it wasn't an order, what if he gets angry, jeez James! I could have covered for you... this is your life-"

"Shut up." Interrupted James. "It wasn't an order. Snape isn't going to 'get angry' and kill me off just because I'm not there. Stop worrying like a damn mother hen."

"Mother hen my ass James! If it's not an order why would you be going? I can't STOP worrying. I need to know... where..." Sirius trailed off, leaving the sentence hanging, and James knowing exactly where it was going. He dropped his cloth, and started pacing the room.

"Always that same question. Where do I draw the line?" He asked himself, glancing at all four walls of pointless crap, which apparently needed cleaning, despite never being on display or used for anything. He heard Sirius grumble a response, but honestly couldn't care what the other boy had said. "I'm not... I won't... I won't hurt anybody." He said; stopping in his tracks and clenching his fists at his sides. He wasn't sure if Sirius could see him, but he wasn't about to start shaking like a scared kid, no matter if the only things that could see him were the walls. He clenched all the muscles in body to try and stop the shaking, but it wasn't helping too much at all. In fact, he was semi-aware that it was only making it worse.

"James?" Sirius' voice said, and James span around, picking up the mirror again to smile at his friend. Sirius wasn't smiling back. "Look, no one likes to think about it but... what if Snape's orders

become a bit more... personal?"

James tried very hard to keep eye-contact with the other marauder, but found he wasn't able to.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He muttered, and Sirius just sighed.

"I don't want to think about it either but... who knows what goes on in his head. What happens if he starts ordering you to do things that are... intimate?"

James fidgeting nervously. It wasn't a conversation he wanted to be having, especially not now he was having second thoughts about whether that was something he'd actually be disgusted by. Before it was plain and simple – he was desperately in love with Lily Evans, and Snape was at best a hindrance and at worst a dungeon bat that did nothing but get in the way. Now... now all James could think about was Snape's stomach muscles and his angry black eyes and his long bony fingers leaving bruises on James' skin. There absolutely had to be something wrong with him – was this another crazy side effect of Cinis? He gave Sirius a wide, fake grin.

"It's fine!" he exclaimed. "Like Snape would ever even think of that kind of thing. Besides, I need to finish up here, so when McGonagall comes I'm done too! Speak to you later!" He added, wondering if there was a way to switch off the connection. Sirius, getting the unspoken message, disconnected. James made a mental note to ask him how he did it.

- X -

Severus stirred the potion periodically anti-clockwise for three minutes. He was careful not to slosh it too much, and flicked his wrist in just the right way to amplify its magical effect, but in all honesty, he was bored stiff. Potter was supposed to have been there almost three hours ago! He cursed himself for believing that Potter would actually come. It was a ridiculous idea to actually trust a Gryffindor; especially one that had made every opportunity to ridicule and terrorize him. What had made him believe that Potter could change, and was quite willing to prove that? The bastard was probably sitting up in his common room with his little marauder buddies laughing about how Severus was down in the dungeons; alone, bored, and whining about how Potter wasn't there. He sighed and shifted his body weight, the hard stool not doing any favours for his back and making his already disheveled posture sag more so that his shoulders became more and more rounded.

He could see he was an easy target. He had long limbs, lanky hair that was incessantly greasy no matter how many times he washed it – the potion fumes did nothing to help with that. A large hooked nose and vampirically pale skin. He wore clothes too big for him, making him look skeletal – but what was he supposed to do, when all his family could afford were hand-me-downs? Everyone knew you couldn't use magic on clothes to make them fit better, or before long they would be tearing at the seams. He could try and bring in money wherever he could to afford nicer clothes, selling potions here and there for extra cash – but all that did was make his hair problem all the worse.

He sighed.

He couldn't believe he'd trusted Potter any further than he could throw the damn Quidditch player. He'd truly believed Potter cared about the making of this potion, and had been let down. Potter had been a full-on twisted jerk before now, doing things Severus had long ago decided to refuse to think about, and Severus had never trusted him. Potter had never made him believe that there was a glimmer of a nice person in him. This was the first time Severus had shown any degree of trust in the boy, and Potter had thrown it back in his face.

"Snape?" Asked a voice from behind him, and Severus swung round, confused as to why he hadn't heard the door open. Had he been so wrapped up in his own thoughts?

He snarled as James made his way, slowly and deliberately, into Severus' personal space. He stopped just a mere three steps from him - which was way too close for comfort in Severus' eyes. The boy was skinnier than ever, even though he'd been eating more in the past few days. His clothes were beginning to hang off him too. He'd obviously yet to have his daily shower, because his hair was beginning to look shiny from the amount of times he ran his hands through it. He took off his glasses and cleaned them on the hem of his shirt, and without them you could see the little red indents on his nose, and his eyes looked slightly too small for his face. The two of them looked the right pair. "Sorry I'm late, I -"

"I don't want to hear your excuses Potter." Interrupted Severus, swinging his body to face his work, and turning his back to James. James swallowed heavily. He'd told Sirius Snape wouldn't be angry, he was fairly certain that he was right, but hearing the tone in Snape's voice betrayed how irritated the Slytherin really was...

"But-"

"But, but, but!" Mimicked Severus, clenching his fist around the cauldron he was working on. "I don't give a fuck about your god-damn butts! Get the hell out of my work room!" He all but screamed.

James backed away a few steps, putting his glasses back on his face.

"Snape..." he trailed off when Severus made no move to turn around and look at him, and in the end, he quickly made his way out of the work room, and along the corridor. He stopped in front of the shelves of potions ingredients and sank to a sitting position, leaning against it. He drew his knees to his chest and hugged them. What had he really done to piss off Snape that much? Sure, he was late. Yeah, he'd said he would help out. But had his absence really made any difference? He wasn't allowed near potions anyway. The only reason he was really coming was to add moral support. He hugged his knees tighter, burying his face in them and pushing his glasses up his nose, uncomfortably pushing them against his eyes. Yet, he didn't make a move to adjust them. He quickly looked up as Snape made his way out of his work room, further down the corridor.

"If you don't want to go back to your common room, I don't care. But get away from this place." The Slytherin ordered. His form looming over the crouching James.

James got to his feet and pushed his way through the shelves, power walking out of the dungeons and up three flights of stairs before he slowed his pace. He was seething on the inside. He had no idea why he was so concerned with what Snape thought anyway.

He stopped power walking and stopped to catch his breath, deciding instead to dawdle up the fifth floor stairs. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Pete wondering off in the other direction. He stopped himself from calling out. It was nearing curfew, and Pete was going away from the common room. But he seemed to be completely caught up in something. It was probably important, and James didn't want to waste Pete's time simply because he was feeling lonely and down. Pete was a big boy anyway, he could look after himself, and he probably already knew that curfew was just around the corner. He was a marauder after all, Pete could make up a good enough excuse **SHOULD** he get caught.

"Password Dear?" Asked the plump lady as he arrived, smiling down at him.

"Stag." James mumbled back grumpily, looking at his shoes. Then he bit his lip, realising he'd

completely forgotten the new password. It had changed recently, but James hadn't planned on getting caught alone any time soon, so hadn't bothered to learn it. Now, here he was, alone, and not able to get into his common room because of his laziness. He should have caught Pete when he had the chance. Pete always knew the passwords. "C'mon, it's me? You recognise me don't you?" He asked the plump lady. She simply shook her head.

"I know, but people can disguise themselves quite effectively in this school, I need the password." She replied apologetically. James sighed, running a hand through his hair, noticing it was beginning to get greasy, and sat down outside to wait for the next person to come by. Judging by the luck he'd had so far that day, he'd be out there all night. The next thing he knew; he was hit in the back of the head as the plump lady's portrait swung forward.

"Oh! Sorry dear!" Exclaimed the plump lady, and Remus' head popped around the portrait. He grinned.

"Hey James! Why are you sat outside? Have you seen Pete?" Asked the werewolf, completely oblivious to the splitting pain in James' head thanks to his untimely entrance. James just shook his head, bypassing Remus into the common room in search of something cool to rest his head against.

"Sugarplum!" exclaimed Sirius, way too loudly for James, who was now suffering from a bad headache. The dog-animagus leapt on his friend, then leant back. "Oh dear, what's got your wand in a twist?" He asked, noticing James' wincing and furrowed brow.

"Forgot the password." James said in a small voice, sitting down on the nearest chair. "Hit in the head by the plump lady." Sirius eyes widened.

"SHE CAN DO THAT?" He asked; standing up in a rush. "Remind me never to forget the password." He added. James rolled his eyes, then immediately regretted it as it made his head throb more. He would probably have a bump there in the morning. Remus came up behind Sirius and clamped a hand down on his shoulder. Under Remus' inhuman strength, Sirius' knees buckled and he was forced into sitting on the armchair behind him.

"Sorry about that James." Said Remus, who had realised why James was suffering. "I didn't know you were the other side." He added sheepishly. James shook his head.

"Not your fault." He replied, rubbing at his head a little.

Sirius, who was now confused about what was going on, decided now was a good time to change the subject.

"How'd it go with Snape?"

James groaned loudly, attracting attention from nearby 1st and 2nd years. Sirius and Remus gave him sympathetic looks, and Remus made Sirius scoot up on his chair so he could squeeze on too. The two boys looked a little funny, both squished into the armchair, and Sirius shifted so that his legs fell over Remus' lap, to make himself more comfortable. Remus discretely shifted himself, taking a second to look upwards – and James was almost certain he heard him mumble 'think of Britain'.

"He didn't even give me a chance to explain." James moaned.

"Why were you going there again?" asked Remus, tilting his head very slightly to the side, and almost bashing skulls with Sirius. James looked at the two, and blushed slightly, looking down at his lap.

"Erm... Just some stuff. To do with the Elixir. Don't worry about it." He lied, waving the question away. Sirius and Remus exchanged a glance, but didn't take James up on it.

"So what happened?"

James sighed. "The bastard kicked me out before I could even tell him why I was late..." He trailed off, "Oh, and I saw Pete on the way up here. He was heading down stairs." He added, remembering Remus' earlier question. Remus bit his lip, exchanging another worried glance with Sirius.

"He's been doing that a lot lately." He eventually said. James shrugged.

"I'm sure if it's really important he'll tell us about it. Right?" He replied. "We've got to trust our friends."

"Right." Grinned Sirius, producing a pack of cards. "Anyone for exploding snap?"

Chocolate

Sirius and Remus were laid on Remus' bed, facing each other, with their knees knocking together uncomfortably. James and Peter had gone out on a scouting mission to Hufflepuff common room under the cloak, and the two boys had taken it as an opportunity to have some one-to-one time. Remus was resting his head in his palm, with his elbow supporting him on the bed. Sirius had twisted his upper body so that he was lying flat on his back, but his pelvis was pointing towards his friend.

"Where were we?" Sirius asked casually, sneaking a glance at the resident werewolf. Remus smirked back. Sirius really did look beautiful, lying down with his hair all fanned about his face; Remus could see the freckle on his right ear that looked like a heart. Even his freckles were aesthetically pleasing.

"We were talking about us." The sandy-haired boy replied. Sirius smiled, a toothy smile showing off his canines.

"Awwh, Wolfykins!" He teased, "We're not breaking up are we?" He asked jokingly. Remus gave him a mock glare.

"Did it ever occur to you that I might actually fancy you?" He asked the boy bluntly. He held his breath as soon as he'd said it; he hadn't meant to say it. He'd been thinking about it ever since Regulus had burst into their dorm before. He didn't have a crush on Sirius – he honestly couldn't imagine anything worse than actually being in a relationship with him – but everyone knew Sirius was beautiful, and Remus would give anything to have just one bite of the forbidden fruit.

Sirius looked at him with light grey eyes, for the first time in a long time he looked nervous.

"We spoke about it before." He said at length, "When we found out about you being gay. You said you'd rather date the giant squid."

Remus smiled, that much was still true. Dating Sirius would be exhilarating for all of two minutes, before he realized he'd signed himself up for over-exhaustive romantic gestures and childish whims and never growing up.

"I didn't mention dating you. What if I just want to sleep with you?" He asked, now was as good a time as ever to get it off his chest, he presumed. Sirius sat up on the bed, so Remus followed, and all of a sudden it felt they were much too close, and Remus could feel Sirius' breath on his chin.

"You wouldn't want to be another notch in my bedpost." Sirius spoke, slowly, under his breath. Remus hummed, and watched as Sirius shivered, wide-eyed and nervous. It felt good to have Sirius' full attention, to not be playing and actually be talking about something that was affecting Remus, but he knew it couldn't last – if Sirius knew that Remus genuinely wanted more than what he was getting, then their friendship would quickly progress into awkward. He gave a large grin to his friend.

"Of course I wouldn't, but man you're fun to mess with!" He lied. Sirius visibly breathed a sigh of relief, seeming to deflate before his friend, and fell back on to bed with a laugh. Remus joined him. "Seriously though, us – as in, the Marauders." He added, getting them back on track.

Sirius sighed.

"Moony." He breathed. Remus pushed his nose into his pillow to stop from grabbing the boy and

taking advantage of him.

"You can feel it can't you?" He asked instead, and the two found eye-contact. Neither wanted to blink.

"If you think we're growing apart..." Sirius began, then paused, to think over his next words.

"Then, we'll just have to work harder to keep us together." He ended.

Remus nodded, closing his eyes.

"Pads?"

"Yes cuddle-bunny?"

Remus smiled slightly at the nickname.

"Thanks."

It was at this point that the door to the dorm crept open and James and Pete walked into the room. Sirius and Remus jumped away from each other, sitting up on the bed at opposite ends, but James just rolled his eyes.

"We've been listening outside." He admitted. Remus coughed embarrassedly. Sirius squeaked.

"How long have you been there?" He asked, wringing his hands nervously.

"A little while." said James, crossing the room and sitting down on the bed with his friends. Pete hovered quietly at the edge until Sirius grabbed his arm and made him sit too.

"How much did you hear?" Asked Remus quietly, shooting shy glances between his friends. It was one thing to tell Sirius he wanted to sleep with him under the pretense of a joke, but an entirely other thing if James and Pete had overheard. James shrugged.

"Just came back up to hear you worrying about the marauders?" He half answered, half questioned. Pete ruffled Remus' hair.

"You worrying is never a good thing." He said.

The sandy-haired boy looked at his lap, and Sirius grinned at his friends.

"Well there's no need is there? We're all here. All four Marauders." He reasoned. The other three friends nodded. "See apple-cake? We're not really growing apart. It's just been a little hectic recently."

"Why do the majority of your pet names revolve around food?" Asked James, shifting a little to get more comfy. The bed wasn't really made for four people to sit comfortably on it, and he kept bumping with the other Marauders.

"Because the way to a man's heart is through his stomach." Replied Remus without even thinking about it.

"That's my chocolate lover." Said Sirius, teasing smirk plastered on his face. Remus blushed and reached for another pillow. James laughed along with his friends, formulating an idea in his head. Snape was mad at him? The way to a man's heart is through his stomach? He already knew Snape liked his cooking from when they'd eaten that meal together, and he knew Snape had a sweet tooth from the large amount of magical sweets in his work room. Perhaps there was a way to reconcile

their tentative arrangement over the Wolf's Bane potion after all.

- X -

Remus looked at James thoughtfully whilst the Gryffindor Chaser shuffled from foot to foot and played with the cuffs of his sleeves. Had he heard that right?

"You want to make chocolate? For Snape?" He asked, trying to clarify, just in case he had actually just had an out of body experience or was imagining things. James coughed and shrugged and looked embarrassed.

"Well, he's mad at me." He mumbled. He ran a hand through his dark hair and looked at the ground, scuffing his shoes against the carpet of Gryffindor common room. The room itself was relatively empty, most of the kids still wandering the halls or meeting with friends from other houses before curfew set in. Sirius and Pete had gone down to the kitchens to steal some food from the house-elves, and James had taken it as his chance to ask for some help from the werewolf. Remus blew a puff of air out through his teeth.

"You want to make chocolate, for Snape." He repeated. James bit his lip.

"He's got a sweet tooth, and you're the one who said the way to a man's heart is through his stomach." He reasoned. "I just want him to stop being mad at me."

Remus sat himself down on one of the puffy armchairs by the fire, and motioned for James to do the same. Remus had an idea what might be going on, but just in case he was wrong he wanted to make sure James was sitting first before he spoke.

"So... You want to fuck him?" He asked bluntly. James choked a little on his own saliva, and drew his knees up to his chest defensively.

"Merlin, no! What the hell Moony?" He shouted. Remus only rose an eyebrow.

"C'mon Prongs." He reasoned. "I've got plenty of experience with suppressed sexual urges. You can tell me the truth."

James seriously considered it. He shrugged.

"I don't know. I think it might just be Stockholm syndrome." He replied, under his breath. Remus let out a short laugh.

"Maybe." He agreed. "Or you genuinely like him."

James shook his head. There was no way he actually genuinely liked the grease-ball. He just wanted Snape to stop being mad at him so he could help with the Wolf's Bane potion. He buried his nose into his knees and spoke into them so that Remus had to strain his ears to hear his next words.

"Are you going to help me or not?" He asked.

Remus smirked.

"Of course I'll help." He replied.

X

"Piss off."

James bit his lip, holding his hands behind his back, clasping the gift-bag tightly, and out of sight of the Slytherin. It had been three days since they'd last spoken, and James had spent all of his Saturday making the little chocolate pieces for the Slytherin.

"I'm here to say sorry." He said, sounding more confident than he felt. Something about Snape put him on edge. Made him feel lost and confused. At first he'd thought it was the simple, overshadowing fact that Snape had the power to take away his life, and he didn't even have to lift a finger to do it. Now, once he'd realised that Snape wasn't as evil as he'd first thought, he thought it must be something completely different. He stood his ground, however, when Snape turned his cold dark eyes to look at him.

They were in the Slytherins workroom come bedroom. Over the last month or so, while Severus had been forced to permanently move into the place, it had become more homely looking. His robes were swung over the sofa, and bits and bobs which were obviously personal possessions had been dotted around. James figured it was something of a compromise. Snape was forced to live alone in a dungeon because his own house hated him, yet because of that he had much more freedom to leave his personal things around. In a way, that freedom was sort of sad, James realised, as he roamed his eyes over the living space.

"I've got work to do." Replied the Slytherin. "Unlike you, I actually care about the success of this potion." He added. He bypassed James in order to reach a book from the bookshelf behind him, in order to do so he had to reach across James, putting their bodies in close proximity. James could smell the unbranded conditioner in his hair, and the musky scent that was undeniably Severus Snape.

"I do care about it." He said calmly, once Snape had retrieved his book and was a safe distance away again. "The other night I was in detention as a result of your order!" he added, growing a little more confident. Snape sighed.

"Don't pin the fact that you are completely useless and derisory on me." He supplied. James frowned.

"I'm NOT deri..." James knew he'd just been insulted, but he didn't think now was the time to get into an argument about that. "I didn't have time to send an owl." He mumbled.

Snape rolled his eyes.

"You have such a lack of intelligence I'm not sure how I ever believed you would be of use anyway." He said scathingly.

James clenched harder on the gift he had brought to tide Snape over, unable to stop himself from glaring at the Slytherin. The familiar lick of flames dancing in his stomach was rising ever higher and higher and he just wanted to scream and fling curses. It was getting harder and harder to push them down.

"Fine." He said instead. "You don't want my help? Then... just, fine!" He brought the gift bag out in front of him. "I made chocolate to say sorry."

"Chocolate?" Asked the Slytherin with a sneer. "I'm really not into sweet things."

James swallowed heavily, anger threatening to bubble over. He knew it was the heat of an argument, but Snape had just clearly lied to him – James had seen the amount of sweets in his fridge. He threw the gift bag at the Slytherin in rage and stormed out of the room, cursing himself for not being able to keep his cool.

He missed Snape picking up the gift bag from where it had fallen to the floor and placing it delicately on the side of the sofa.

X

"How'd it go with Snape?" Questioned Sirius, sitting in one of Gryffindor common rooms many comfortable chairs. James had a major case of Deja vu as he stomped past his friends in a strop, and up the stairs to their dormitory. Sirius, Remus and Pete all exchanged slightly worried looks before chasing him upstairs.

"He didn't like the gift?" Teased Sirius, trying to lighten the mood. He'd walked in on James and Moony attempting to make the chocolates earlier and James had been forced to explain. Sirius had at first been uncomfortable, but soon came round when Remus let him try the leftovers. Now, James glared at him, sitting down heavily on his bed and bringing a pillow out from behind him to smother himself with. Remus darted forward and plucked the offending object from his grasp.

"No need to go to drastic measures." He reprimanded. James glared up at him instead, before turning over so he didn't have to make the effort to glare anymore. Remus and Sirius exchanged another worried glance while Peter sat down on the edge of James' bed.

"What happened?" Asked the rat animagus. James made a noise which sounded a lot like 'humph' and buried his head in his duvet. Sirius rolled his eyes, shoving James' legs out of the way and sitting down next to Pete. Remus strolled around the bed and crouched down next to where James was currently trying to suffocate himself with his duvet. He pried the cover out of James' clenched fist and gave James his 'daddy' look.

"How are we supposed to make it better if we don't know what happened?" He asked. James blushed slightly, avoiding eye contact by engaging in a staring competition with the sheets.

"You can't make it better." He eventually replied. "Snape's just a complete moron!" he added, for good measure. He heard Sirius laugh and couldn't help the very small smile that slipped on to his lips. He tried to crush it before anyone noticed, but Remus saw and grinned.

"Come on Jamie-boy, if Snape's such a 'moron' why are you so upset hey?" He asked, raising an eyebrow with a practiced air. James stuck his tongue out.

"Because I'm emotionally charged and want everyone to like me. Now piss off." He said, and while Remus would never tell James so, he thought the entire sentence hit James right on the mark. He shrugged, climbing over James so he too could sit on the bed.

"Somehow this feels very reminiscent on this morning." Said Sirius, shifting a little to give Remus room. James sat up, so they could all sit in relative comfort.

"Yeah, except this time you and Moony aren't acting all lovey-dovey" Teased James. Sirius gasped in a completely fake way.

"You're right!" He exclaimed. "Remus, my darling prince! Why is it we aren't acting as if we are in love, can it be you don't feel for me anymore?"

Remus gave a short snort of amusement, shaking his head.

"You haven't been all that sweet yourself princess." He replied, making James and Peter laugh and Sirius cross his arms in a way that stated his was in no way a 'princess'. Remus continued; "I haven't received a gift for so long! James gave Snape some chocolate, where's mine?" He added. Sirius laughed, then stood to search the room for chocolate, with Remus and Pete watching him.

They didn't notice that James had suddenly had a turning realisation, and was sat thinking about it.

He'd given Snape chocolate, and that was a sign that he was in love with the Slytherin? He gaped at his sheets. No way... Admittedly, Snape was a much nicer person than James had expected, and it had been a relief to know he didn't support Voldemort... but he could barely get his head around the idea he might like the greasy brat, let alone... love him.

Names

Sirius felt awkward, sitting side by side with his best friend's long-time crush by the lake. It was the beginning of October and the days were getting colder, but due to years of social status training he'd instinctively put down his robes as a blanket for them to sit on, and was clad in only grey school trousers and a thin white shirt; he could feel goosebumps beginning to rise on his skin, and rubbed at his arms to be rid of them.

Lily was staring into the lake.

"Thanks for coming." She eventually said, not taking her eyes away from the choppy water. Sirius shrugged.

"I said I would." He replied. He looked about to see if anyone was going to spot them, but due to the cold most of the population of Hogwarts had taken to staying indoors. Remus was studying in the library, Pete had said he was tutoring some third years in Potions, and James was... James was where he always seemed to be since the beginning of term – in the company of Severus Snape, doing Merlin knows what. Sure, if it was something to do with getting better from Cinis, Sirius had no problem with it, but the Black heir was almost certain that James was hanging out with the greasy Slytherin over and above the terms of their deal. He'd almost fainted when James and Remus had told him they were making chocolate for the bat.

Lily pulled her jacket more around her.

"I got a letter from home." She admitted. "That day, when you saw me crying."

Sirius shot a confused look at the back of her head. He would give almost anything to have a letter from home – his parents had refused to write to him since he was accepted into Gryffindor, and the summers were torture, with his mother ignoring everything he said, and his father only speaking to him when she was out of earshot. He'd eventually pulled up the courage to leave that summer and had made his way to the Potter house – and now it seemed even Regulus was mad at him.

"Did someone die?" He asked, wondering whether that had come out too bluntly. Lily just shook her head.

"I have a sister. She's... she's a muggle."

Sirius leant forward, looking over to Lily's face to see her green eyes filled with tears again. He wasn't good with people crying.

"Is she okay?" He asked. Lily nodded.

"She's fine." She replied. "She just... she hates me. She hates that I'm a witch. She hates magic in general." She sighed. Sirius raised a hand to pat her shoulder comfortingly, then decided not to and let it fall in his lap.

"Do your parents agree with her?"

Lily shook her head.

"No, but they never speak about her. She's always out of the house over the holidays she avoids me. I don't know what to do to make it up to her – I can't help how I was born."

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. He completely agreed, you couldn't help who you were.

"I don't know what to say Evans." He said, shivering in the cold.

Lily smiled at the lake.

"I know. But I feel better for talking to you."

Sirius didn't hesitate this time, he put his hand on her shoulder, and she turned round at the contact. He smiled. She smiled back.

"I will always be about next time you need to talk to someone." He told her. He wasn't usually one for making big promises, but this one, he decided to keep.

- X -

Regulus Black entered the library feeling bored. He'd spotted Sirius out on the grounds and for a moment he'd wanted to go over and apologize for freezing him out and have a nice long chat with him, but then he'd seen he wasn't alone, but with Lily Evans. Sirius was never alone – it was difficult to find the time to actually tell Sirius why he was so upset.

He sat down heavily at one of the tables, pulling out his transfiguration text book from his backpack and flipping idly through the pages. Things had to be bad if he had resorted to actually studying. He sighed at a particularly gruesome diagram of a bird half way through being turned into a goblet.

He was mad at Sirius, because they'd both grown up in the same household. Regulus had forgiven him for being sorted into Gryffindor, when suddenly all of his parents hopes and dreams for the perfect son and fallen solely to him. He'd forgiven Sirius for the countless times he'd sent their mother into a hysterical state, where she refused to feed them for days. He'd forgiven him when he'd chosen to stay at Hogwarts throughout the Christmas holidays, rather than return to their family home and face her – leaving it once again to Regulus. But over the summer Sirius had decided that he couldn't take her ignoring him anymore, and left in the dead of night – escaping to the Potters. Leaving Regulus, once again, to deal with the fall out.

Regulus wasn't sure if he could deal with another holiday where Walburga called him Sirius on a regular basis, and never seemed to notice she'd called him the wrong name. He wasn't sure he could deal with another holiday where Walburga screamed at his father that it was all his fault Sirius had turned out strange, and then went into a dissociative state where 'Sirius' was back in the family, before he'd gone to Hogwarts, and she sat in the drawing room playing piano and laughing at 'Sirius' and his funny tales. He wasn't sure he could deal with another holiday where they sat down to family meals and there was a plate left out for Sirius when he wasn't there to eat it, and they sat in silence for hours whilst Walburga tried to figure out why the food wasn't going down, before she came back out of her dissociative state and blamed Regulus for not eating the extra portion. The Christmas break would be coming up in just a few short months, and Regulus just wasn't sure he could go back again. He wanted to talk to Sirius about it, but what was he supposed to say?

He hated Sirius for leaving him there in that environment. He wanted to ask Sirius to take him with him to wherever he went. He wanted to be safe again.

He couldn't stay at Hogwarts over Christmas though – it was getting harder and harder to stay in the Slytherin dorms. With Severus there he had had some protection against the older witches and wizards in their blood purity gangs, but Severus had gone off the map over a month ago, and

Regulus was no longer safe.

He looked at his arms, covered by the sleeves of his robes. They were covered in finger mark bruises where Knott and Avery had pinned him down – his stomach was covered in deep gashes and green hued welts where Narcissa and Lucius had done a number on him. They'd been careful to avoid his face, after the last time when the Marauders had stepped in to help, but the beatings were getting more regular. They were beginning to threaten not only him but the people he loved – Sirius, his mother and father. Without Severus there they had stepped their pressure up a notch, and he was beginning to get offers to join the Death Eaters almost every day. It was only a matter of time before one of them realised he had turned them down once too often, and they would go after his mother to prove a point. Walburga hadn't been in her right state of mind for a long time, and she wouldn't be able to deal with a visit from the Death Eaters. It was up to Regulus to make things right for her. Perhaps he could finally make his parents proud if he did join the Death Eaters – he knew they supported blood purity.

"Is anyone sitting here?"

Regulus looked up into the amber-brown eyes of Remus Lupin. The boy held up a complicated looking book on Ancient Runes, and gave a toothy smile. Regulus shook his head, politely holding out his hand to show there was a free seat opposite him. Remus sat down and opened his book to page one. Regulus watched him for a bit, but had to look away when the sandy-haired boy looked up and caught him looking.

He'd think about all that stuff later, for now – the library just got interesting.

X

He was there. Standing there like it was no big deal. Leaning against the wall, right outside his stock shelf, his corridor and his workroom. He offered a small, welcoming smile, and Severus sighed, dropping his bag on the floor next to him. It had been over a week since Potter had come to him with that silly gift bag of chocolate, and then there was this ambush. He'd just returned from a day's worth of classes and now he had to deal with Potter's ramblings? Said Potter pushed himself off of the wall, and said in one small and slightly awkward whisper.

"Severus."

Snape locked eyes with the Gryffindor, trying to figure out what Potter thought he was doing. He'd never heard Potter use his first name before. It was either Snape or Snivellus, but never before his given name. Was this supposed to be some form of apology? He couldn't deny it felt good to see the Quidditch player swallow his pride and use his actual name. Never to be shown up, he spoke;

"J-James." he said, coughing slightly afterwards in the complete awkwardness of the situation. James held eye contact with him, not blinking, trying incredibly hard not to show that his breath had just hitched. He smiled. Severus, after some hesitation, briefly smiled back. James thought it might have been the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen – and then he crushed that thought and sent it away.

"Sev-er-us." The Gryffindor said slowly, rolling it around on his tongue before letting it slide out. Severus rose an eyebrow expectantly, then James leant forward and clamped a hand on his shoulder, making him tense. "Yeah, I'm going to call you Sev." He added, retracting his hand at Severus' uneasy reaction to the contact. Severus, despite being glad that James had let go of his shoulder, glared at the nickname.

"You shouldn't get so friendly." He scolded, but James just smiled.

"Go ahead and give me your best shot Sev." The Gryffindor replied. "Order me about and embarrass me to hell and back. I'm determined to be nice to you, even if it kills me."

"It will do."

There was an eerie seriousness in Severus' sentence that made James stop smiling and gaze at the Slytherin worriedly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He asked under his breath. Severus tried to move past him, but James, despite being smaller, blocked off his path. Severus wasn't about to make human contact and push him out of the way, and so just stood back. James made no move to un-block the Slytherin's path.

"You know what it means Pot... James." He replied, "We're both crazy for even talking here. My house won't stand for it. They've already tried to do me in and that didn't work, so I would be careful who you associate with."

James clenched his fist and slammed it into the wall, although he regretted it afterwards, since it hurt a lot, and didn't look as cool as he thought it would. He still sighed and locked eyes with Severus.

"I won't stand for this." He said, making Severus glare at him. "It's ridiculous, the way your house treats you."

Severus growled slightly, and for a short moment James was reminded of Remus when he got angry - inhuman.

"My house doesn't really treat me any differently from how you and your friends treated me for the last four years." He reminded, making James flinch.

"I know." He gulped out. He wanted to say sorry, but he doubted the word would make up for what they'd put the Slytherin through. There was a noise out in the classroom that made Severus step forward, out of sight of anyone who might be in the classroom, but into James so he was trapping the Gryffindor between himself and the wall. James coughed at the intimacy, looking anywhere but at the Slytherin.

"The... Ch-chocolate." He stammered out, trying not to get embarrassed discussing the other day's hissy-fit. Severus looked over him, making James squirm a little.

"I gave it to Regulus." He said. James bit his lip, trying not to feel too disappointed that Severus' hadn't even tried his gift. "But... Thank you. For the thought." Severus carried on, making James gulp and choke on his own saliva.

"Erm... it wasn't really anything." He said, staring determinedly at the floor. There was a very awkward pause, then Severus coughed, making James glance up. The Gryffindor was disappointed though, and he couldn't help but say something. "I just thought, because of all the sweets..."

Severus furrowed his brow in confusion, before he realised that James must have been talking about his fridge full of sweets. He had never had a sweet tooth, but the elves knew that Dumbledore would often come down to check that Severus wasn't going to blow something up with his experiments, and kept it stocked just in case. He explained as much to the Gryffindor before him, who blushed when he realised he'd made a mistake.

"Being embarrassed doesn't suit you." The Slytherin stated, before walking out of the storeroom and into their classroom. James got over his slight shock and followed him.

"What does suit me then?" He asked, catching up and falling in step beside him. Severus spared him a glance.

"Why ask me?" He eventually answered. James shrugged, and they made their way to the great hall in silence, as dinner would be served soon enough.

When they went through the Great Hall's doors, Severus split off to go to Slytherin table, and James went to sit down at the Gryffindor table. He couldn't find his friends anywhere, and so sat down next to Frank Longbottom from the year above. A few minutes later Remus entered the hall, a bunch of books under his arms that he'd borrowed from the library.

"Have you been Pete and Sirius?" James asked as Remus sat down, but Remus just shrugged, opening his books again as he sat down, reading them over as he blindly shoveled food on to his plate.

"I saw them both out on the ground earlier when I was checking on my Herbology project." said Frank, having overheard the conversation. "Sirius was with Lily Evans, and Pete was heading towards the forest."

James gave him a thankful smile, and although he was worried as to what business Pete had out near the forest, he was more concerned with why Sirius and Lily would be hanging out together.

Taboo

"You're a werewolf!"

James, taken off guard as he entered Severus' work room, slammed the door shut behind him and leant against it. Severus was sat on a stool, shoulders rounded as he hunched over one of the three cauldrons in his workroom; James was beginning to recognize it as the one Severus was always at when he was working on the Wolf's Bane. The Gryffindor shot a confused look at his new found... acquaintance.

"I'm really not." He replied.

Severus rolled his eyes, finally looking up from the depths of the cauldron, and into James' muddy browns. They held eye contact for a moment, and James found himself looking away. It had been a couple of days since they'd last spoken, and James had received an owl asking him to come to the workroom. Without any explanation to his friends, he'd dropped everything and ran. He couldn't deny that he'd been craving the Slytherin's company in his absence.

"You are now." The Slytherin said, standing up from his stool. His voice was deep and resonated within James like the beat of a drum, sending shivers through him and a rush of blood to his groin. The Gryffindor twisted himself awkwardly as Severus crossed the room and placed a hand on his shoulder, he lead James to the sofa and sat him down as if he were a child, and James found he really didn't mind. "This is a role play exercise. Some simple questions about things I've read to assess how knowledgeable about werewolves you really are." He explained.

James nodded along the explanation, watching Severus' lips move as he spoke; eventually, he cleared his throat and said:

"Of course, okay."

Severus nodded as confirmation, and if he thought it strange that James was so willing to go along with his whims, he didn't show it.

"Now, given that it's about three hours before the moon is completely full, what exactly would you be doing?"

James mulled over the question slightly, thinking of Remus hours before the full moon.

"I'd probably be curled up in bed moaning at my friends to bring me chocolate."

Severus spared James a slightly disgruntled look, before dragging another book off his shelf, and flipping through its contents to find his next question. James mused that the werewolves Severus knew must not be chocoholics.

"You choose a mate... how long on average would you stay with them?" Severus asked. James thought for a moment about being witty, but his last answer had been stupid, and this was a test

after all.

"Forever." Was his final reply.

Severus went back to his book to find his next question, but they were interrupted by an angry hissing coming from the cauldrons by the far wall – both boys looked over to see the middle cauldron, that containing the Wolf's Bane, fizzing and bubbling over. Severus swore under his breath, and James didn't think he'd ever heard anyone say 'fuck' quite so exquisitely.

"Go to the greenhouses and get a large mandrake." He ordered, and within seconds James was on his feet and rushing out the door.

When he returned, Severus was standing over the Wolf's Bane, muttering spells under his breath and pointing his wand at the liquid, which had become as choppy as an ocean within the cauldrons confines. Severus snatched the mandrake from him, and ripped off some of the leaves from the top – James had always been a little worried about whether that hurt the mandrakes since they'd studied them in Herbology back in second year, but Severus didn't seem worried as he plunged the leaves into the potion. Almost instantly the bubbling stopped and the surface became calm again.

Severus huffed, crossing his arms over his chest and just looking at the cauldron. James wasn't sure what to do or say, should he offer to take the mandrake back now he had served his purpose? Should he congratulate the Slytherin on managing to salvage the potion? As it was, he didn't have to make the decision. Severus pulled a syringe from the chest of drawers, and filled it with a clear liquid from a glass, before injecting it into the Mandrake.

James bit his lip.

"Did you kill it?" He asked. Severus spared him a short, unamused look.

"Then what use would it be?" He shot back, before: "I've sedated it for the time being. I can keep it here while it's sedated in case something like that happens again."

James sighed a breath of relief, and Severus jumped right back to business once he was sure the disaster had been aborted.

"If I was weak, bloodied and defenseless, what would you do?" He asked. James shrugged in response, speaking before he'd actually thought about the question and formed a reasonable answer.

"I'd probably jump your bones." He replied. As soon as he said it he clamped a hand over his mouth and looked away from Severus' questioning eyes in embarrassment. Of course Severus had been continuing on their role-play exercise and not just asking James what he would do. The Gryffindor coughed awkwardly. He wasn't supposed to be thinking those types of thoughts at all, let alone telling Severus that he wanted to... explore their new, tentative relationship further. He thought fast for a way to salvage the wreckage.

"I meant... your bones. As a werewolf. I would attack you." He eventually clarified, each word coming out stiff and unwilling.

Severus continued to give James questioning looks, but at least nodded at the answer. He returned back to the Wolf's Bane, and James heard him mutter about losing weeks' worth of work. The Gryffindor couldn't decide whether to sit or stand, whether to speak or stay silent. He felt like he needed guidance on everything around the other boy. Severus finally looked up from the potion and waved a dismissive hand.

"Leave." He said, and James nodded, turning on his heels and was out of the room before Severus could call him back.

He walked down the corridor and back out into the potions classroom trying not to think about the amount of sexual tension he'd just left behind in the Slytherin's workroom. He'd at first thought his increasing inability to function correctly around the boy had been fear, but then he'd had that dream and it became more and more obvious it was a case of misguided sexual frustration. James wanted to believe it was all a weird side effect of Cinis – a type of Stockholm syndrome like he'd told Moony; but – but it wasn't. James wanted to be near him, craved his correspondence and would drop anything at a word from the domineering Slytherin. He was completely, irreversibly and pathetically devoted to seeing how far his own fascination would go, and that meant sticking close to Severus Snape.

X

Later that day James was shuffling down the corridor, thinking about how Severus had banished him from the workroom earlier, when he was almost knocked sideways by the Black family heir putting a lot of his weight on the slighter Gryffindor. James slid one foot to the side to steady himself, proud he'd managed to negate the effects of Cinis, if only once. Sirius slung a long arm around the Chaser.

"My little doe!" He laughed, and James noticed he was wearing his muggle leather jacket all the girls were so fond of. "What makes you so... thoughtful cuddle-bunny?"

James grimaced at Sirius' worsening pet names.

"I'm a stag..." He replied, trying to push away the arm Sirius had slung casually over his shoulders. The taller boy only dragged him closer to his side, grinning wildly. James could already feel the lick of flames inside him banging on his ribcage – he was in a bad mood thanks to Severus kicking him out and not allowing him to help further with the Wolf's Bane, and now Sirius was being loud and infuriating with the stupid pet names.

"Oh Sugarplum-Cupcake!" The Black heir sang melodramatically, "You're so broody all the time recently! I can't bear to see you so depressed Baby-doll!" He added. James finally managed to push away the other boys hold over his shoulders and glared at his best friend – there was a crowd of people in the corridor already beginning to stare at them, and he wasn't in the mood for another stupid rumour going around about just how friendly they were.

"Could you stop with those ridiculous nicknames?" He all but shouted, placing his hands on hips in frustration, but also a little to steady himself. "And I'm not broody!" He protested, a little more quietly.

This moment was when Lily Evans chose to walk by the twosome; as ever the beautiful prefect, red hair hanging just passed her shoulders and dressed in a white and blue cricket jumper and a mid-thigh, pleated, dark blue skirt. Her heels clicked as she walked by. She shot Sirius a small smile, which did not go unnoticed by James.

"What's going on?" She asked the Black, but it was James who answered, removing his hands from their girly position on his hips and running one through his messy hair.

"Oh, just being awesome." He said as nonchalantly as he could, but Sirius grinned at her.

"James is broody." He explained. James may have been about to protest, but Lily only rolled her eyes anyway, and was walking off down the hall before anything more could be said on the matter.

"Bye Lily!" Sirius called after her, and she stuck a hand in the air, waving. James rounded on Sirius, playfully punching him in the arm.

"How am I supposed to get her to go out with me if you won't let me be cool around her?" He moaned, "And since when have you two been so friendly anyway?" he asked, trying to sound casual, but probably failing in that he was genuinely interested. Sirius shrugged, looking shiftily around the corridor. He sighed a little before answering.

"Well... you've been pretty obsessed with Snape so I'm not surprised you didn't notice, but Evans has had some issues and... I've been helping her through them." He confessed.

James bit his lip at the idea of Sirius knowing just how obsessed with Snape he truly had been in the last month or so, and squirmed a little under his friend's gaze.

"I... I haven't been obsessing over Severus." He murmured. "Getting Lily to go out with me is still a top priority." He lied, but Sirius just rolled his eyes.

"Please, you've barely recognized she exists since term began." He shot back. "And you just called that grease-ball by his first name!" he accused.

James winced, he wasn't supposed to let the other marauders know about the strange, tentative acquaintanceship he'd sprung up with his savior.

"I meant Snape... it's just – things have been busy, with his orders." He lied again.

Sirius laughed hollowly.

"Of course, the orders – your deal. I've noticed you get way more than one owl from him a day, and at the sight of that git's writing you'll drop anything. I know your life is on the line but I don't think that's entirely it anymore. I think you like him." He accused. James felt himself go hot in the face and around his ears, and instantly hated himself for it. Sirius saw the redness of his face and sighed. "You're embarrassed because I found out the truth." He stated, but James shook his head.

"I don't... I don't swing that way." He feebly protested. Sirius looked as if he was about to go on to say more, but stopped, looking at his friend in shock. He coughed awkwardly, averting his eyes when their staring contest dragged on for a little too long.

"Um... I actually meant... like as a friend." He clarified, making James go even redder. The Chaser looked down at his feet, playing with the sleeves of his terracotta jumper. Sirius huffed. "I just... you can't actually be thinking of being friends with that low-life bat?" He asked, brushing over whatever James' earlier statement of swinging had meant. James felt a lick of anger take over him at Severus being insulted.

"He's given me no reason not to." He stated, glaring at his best friend. Sirius, for a moment, seemed crestfallen, then laughed.

"I can't believe this..." He breathed out. "James Potter and Severus Snape? Best buddies?" He asked. He was looking anywhere but at the Gryffindor Quidditch player.

"I never said best friends Sirius." James tried to interject, but Sirius wasn't really paying him much attention. He was too busy laughing at the ludicrousness of the idea. "Sirius... I only said he didn't give me a reason not to be friends... not that we were."

"No, no, no!" Sirius continued on sarcastically, "Makes perfect sense! He bosses you around and tries to embarrass you on a daily basis, perfect excuse to get all buddy!" He raged, making James

reddeven even more at the stares they were receiving from other students. When Sirius put it like that it did seem a little stupid. But Severus had barely given James any orders recently, and after all the Marauders had done to him, it made sense that the Slytherin would want a little revenge – James couldn't find it in his heart to be upset at a daily dose of embarrassment, when it was a small price to pay for any forgiveness Severus might eventually give him.

"Sirius-" He tried, hoping to shed some light on the situation. Perhaps if Padfoot understood why James was so impressed by the Slytherin and his work on the Wolf's Bane, then they could avoid the fall out. However, Sirius cut him off before he had a chance to speak more on the subject.

"In fact!" He shouted. "I should go find someone to boss me about and embarrass me! What are you, masochistic?"

James glared at the insinuation; mainly because he'd been wondering the same thing a lot over the last few weeks of captivity he'd felt for the Slytherin.

"I'm not..." He protested. "I-"

"You're not masochistic, you don't want to be his friend but you're happy to spend all your time with him, call him by his first name, forget the love of your life and turn on your real friends for him. Fuck Prongs, stop denying it!" Sirius shouted over him. James could feel the anger boiling inside him and had to clench his fists at his sides to abate it. Sirius carried on, now in full stride regarding his feelings towards the Slytherin. "That boy is a threat James and you need to stop hanging out with him. He's got you spellbound, but he's a threat to your life, our friendship, everything! He'd be better off dead!" Sirius screamed. James felt his anger bubbling over. Now Sirius was just saying ridiculous, malicious things.

"You sound like your mother, telling me who I can and can't be friends with!" He shouted back. He saw Sirius flinch at the words but was too angry to care that he was toeing the line. "I can hang out with whoever I damn well please and I'm choosing Severus." He added, quieter this time because people were still watching and he wasn't sure if he was ready for the whole of Hogwarts to know about his want to be friends with Snape.

Sirius thinned out his lips at his friend's words, and took a few deep breaths to calm himself before he spoke again.

"You can choose the grease-ball, but you're choosing between him and me. If you still want to be friends with me, then he's got to go." He replied, levelly. James glared.

"What does that even mean, 'got to go'? What do you plan to do? Feed him to the wolves?" He shot back defensively, but as soon as he'd said it both boys gasped.

Although James meant it sarcastically, he had still said it; the biggest taboo amongst the Marauders. Ever since they'd found out about Remus' furry little problem they'd made it very clear amongst themselves that it wasn't a joke and shouldn't be joked about. James went to open his mouth and apologise instantly for his slip, but out of the crowd he heard the familiar voice of Peter telling everyone to move along and instead he searched for his friend's face. Once he found Peter in the crowd, ushering everyone else away, he saw a hard, stony look that told him the rat animagus had heard their entire fight.

"Fuck James." Said Sirius under his breath, when James wasn't able to speak himself. "I don't even know who you are anymore."

Yeti

Remus curled his toes in his socks, fingers tracing the edge of his heavy Ancient Runes textbook that he wasn't reading –instead opting to look out over the castle from his spot on the dormitory window seat. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck sticking up from the uncomfortable sensation of someone looking at him from behind his back, but refused to turn around; he knew exactly who it was anyway. All four boys had confined themselves to the room – Pete practicing cleaning charms on a pile of unwashed clothes, Sirius playing with his beaters bat, and James periodically shifting between staring at the ceiling solemnly and staring at the back of Remus' head solemnly. Every time the werewolf called him out on it there was a short, awkward silence and James would avert his attention back to the ceiling with an oddly ashamed frown. Remus had thought perhaps Sirius would be able to shake the Chaser out of it, but the other two boys in the dormitory had told him they had no wish to speak to James at that moment in time, leaving Remus in the dark as to what they were fighting about.

"I'm really fed up of this." The werewolf finally stated, when the feeling of being watched became too uncomfortable to bear, and stood from his position. He deposited his textbook down on his bedside table as he passed and gave the occupants of the room a final glance before leaving. Pounding down the stairs to the common room he briefly wondered if the boys would actually come to blows over whatever spat they'd had, and started going over a bunch of counter-curses and anti-jinxes in his head. Just in case.

He held his head high as he strode through the common room and right out the portrait hole, giving Lily a little wave as he passed. There was still a half hour until curfew, and with his prefect status he had some leeway with the curfew rule – he could always say he was just finishing up a round if caught out by a teacher. He dawdled without a cause down the first flight of stairs away from the tower, pondering on the tense atmosphere he'd left behind in the dormitory as he passed by a row of suits of armour they had once transfigured into armoured polar bears. He was looking at them as he passed and as such didn't realize until it was too late that he was about to walk headfirst into a smaller boy.

Both boys went tumbling to the floor in a flurry of limbs, Remus grabbing the shoulders of the shorter boy and the boy wound a hand awkwardly into the Gryffindor's hair. They fell with Remus on top, and the other boy's knee came up, connecting with Remus' stomach and effectively winding the older Gryffindor. The werewolf let out a short swearword, but managed to shoot out a hand at the last moment to cushion the younger boys head before it hit the stone corridor. Once all the commotion was finished with, they lay there for a moment, wincing and assessing what damage had happened, before Remus pushed himself up and gave the other boy a hand.

They stood and looked at each other for a moment – Remus now with ruffled hair and a scuff on the knee of his black jeans, and the boy with the elbows of his robes ripped. Remus let his eyes move appreciatively over the others body – large grey eyes; ivory skin and jet black hair that hung in thick shiny curls; long legs and slim waist; and manicured hands that fluttered over the Slytherin tie on his torso as he checked himself over for injuries or marks to his otherwise pristine uniform.

This was Regulus Black.

"Oh, hi." The sandy-haired teen said, his mouth instantly going dry. It seemed since that evening where Regulus had crashed into their dormitory that the younger Slytherin boy was everywhere; and Remus just couldn't get enough of it. He licked his lips nervously. "You're pretty far up into the castle." He added, checking his watch. Twenty minutes to curfew – still plenty of time to get back to the Slytherin dorms.

"Erm... I was looking... for my cat." Regulus replied, shifting his gaze away from the Gryffindor and crossing his arms defiantly. Remus got the impression the young Slytherin thought he was being told off; Remus being a prefect and all.

"Oh, I didn't know you have a cat." The werewolf said conversationally, then figured he should probably exert some sort of authority. "You better find it before curfew."

The boy nodded, but Remus could see the fallen expression on his face; perhaps he was genuinely worried about the animal. Remus had never exactly seen the fuss over animals (they always seemed to have a vendetta against him because they could never tell if he was man or wolf and it confused them) but he knew people got very attached to their pets, and it seemed Regulus was no exception. He wanted to reassure the boy.

"I'm sure even if you don't find it before curfew, it'll come back right? Cats are good at finding their way home." He tried.

Regulus nodded.

"Right... I guess." He replied, looking moodily down at his expensive black shoes.

Remus shifted awkwardly, feeling guilty. He'd been trying to assert some authority but he hadn't expected the youngest Black to be so attached to an animal. Sirius had always been blasé about pets (from what Remus could tell the Black family had kept every exotic pet you could think of and what was exciting about a cat or an owl when you could have a dragon?), so it seemed odd to think the little brother was so caught up about a normal, every-day feline.

"What's its name?" Remus asked, resigned and knowing what he'd have to do to quench his guilt. Besides, it gave him an excuse to be close to the younger Black. "I'll help you look."

Regulus shook his head forcefully.

"No!" He exclaimed, "There's no need!" He protested. He gave a large grin, and made to speed off down the corridor, but Remus caught his wrist before he got too far. The youngest Black flinched under the werewolf's strength and Remus almost instantly let go at the expression, worried he'd hurt the boy. Regulus stumbled slightly and rubbed at his wrist.

"Come on." The werewolf said awkwardly, shuffling. He hadn't meant to use so much force on the younger boy. "I want to help. What's its name? I promise I won't laugh" He added, and only a hint of teasing fell into his tone.

Regulus gave him a weary look, but evidently decided that Remus was not going to take no for an answer, because the next thing he said was:

"Erm... Yeti?"

Remus rose an eyebrow at the confession, and tried to stop his mouth from twitching into a smirk.

"Yeti then." He repeated, before matching stride with the younger boy. They walked in silence for a moment; Remus searching the area for the cat, painfully aware of the Slytherin walking beside him. "What type of Cat is she?" Remus asked eventually.

"He." corrected Regulus, making Remus' mouth make another twitch towards a smile. "He's... err... a Himalayan." The younger boy supplied. Remus nodded slightly, as if he knew exactly what that meant, but upon seeing Regulus give him a surprised look at his supposed knowledge of feline breeds, confessed;

"I have no idea what a Himalayan cat looks like."

Regulus laughed, and Merlin if it wasn't the most beautiful thing Remus had ever heard.

"They're white bodied, with dark legs and tails and dark faces." He explained. "Their faces are like Persians, in that they're all squished."

Remus nodded along to the explanation, forming the image of the feline in his head. They fell easily into a polite conversation about Regulus' school work and Remus' duties as a prefect as they searched, taking regular breaks in the dialogue so that one or both of them might periodically call out 'Yeti'. They'd reached all the way to the staircase leading down to the entrance hall before Remus asked the question that had been bothering him for a while.

"Are you leading me on a wild goose chase?" He asked bluntly, "It feels like we've searched the whole castle!"

The werewolf sat down heavily on the top step of the grand staircase, resting his head in his palms. Regulus followed him down, looking for all the world like a marauder with a mischievously caught-out look on his model-like face. Remus caught himself staring at the boy's high cheek bones and perfectly chiseled jawline.

"There isn't a cat." The Slytherin admitted. Remus couldn't exactly say he was surprised.

"Then why did you tell me there was?" He asked.

Regulus shrugged at the questioning, looking down at his shiny black shoes so that his thick curls fell down over his eyes.

"I guess... I just didn't want you to send me back to the dungeons."

Remus snorted.

"Why would I? Curfew isn't until three more minutes..." He said, checking his watch. He wanted to assert more authority; tell the kid he really should be getting back to his common room, but he couldn't bring himself to send the elegant teenager sat down next to him away.

"I wanted to talk to Sirius." The Slytherin stated, looking ahead at the Hogwarts crest, hanging above the large wooden doors that lead to the grounds, as he spoke. He bought up his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, leaning his cheek down on one of his knees so he could look directly at Remus. The werewolf became impossibly awkward under the gaze. Regulus sighed. "I wanted... to get some answers from him."

"Why didn't you say so? He probably could have done with someone to talk to." Remus replied, scuffing the heel of his shoe against the step below. Regulus shrugged, making a noise in his throat that came out strangled and hoarse and sent blood rushing to parts of Remus that made him question his moral judgement and have to remind himself forcibly that the boy next to him was

only thirteen. He coughed before continuing on. "Did you... want to talk about it?" He asked clumsily. Regulus shook his head against his knee, the angle making it look more like a nod than anything else.

"It's okay." He mumbled. "Did you... want to talk about why you're wondering the castle looking for a fake cat and not in Gryffindor common room with the others?" He replied, and Remus didn't miss how he was shifting the attention, but decided not to bring the boy up on it. He shrugged.

"You know, those boys are stupid." He eventually stated, watching the Slytherin carefully for any sign that he was boring the younger boy. "Sirius and James - they have each other, best friends, and now they're fighting and not even talking. I don't even know why! You'd think with James' condition..." Remus trailed off, biting his lip, shooting Regulus a worried look. The Slytherin was easy to talk to – Remus had almost completely forgotten that he wouldn't be aware of James' illness.

"James' condition?" Regulus prompted, shifting his gaze back to the Hogwarts crest. Remus shook his head.

"Don't worry." He said.

"I'm not." Regulus replied, and he looked back at Remus with a genuine smile. Remus felt certain that if he hadn't been sat down his knees very well would have given out beneath him at the look. He quickly averted his eyes just in case the younger boy was a secret master of legilimency and could tell that Remus' thoughts at that moment were anything but pure.

"What you wanted to say to Sirius..." He said instead, shuffling his feet against the step below. "Could it wait until morning? Or did you... want me to take you back up there? I know it's after curfew, but as a prefect I can bend a few rules." He explained.

Regulus shrugged nonchalantly, making Remus' stomach curl in a way that made him feel faintly sick, but put a ridiculously goofy smile on his face.

"I'm sure it can wait." The Slytherin replied. Remus looked at the younger male for a long time, trying to figure out if it genuinely could wait, or if he was just being polite. Eventually he stood up, offering a hand to Regulus, who took it gratefully. They stood facing each other for a small moment, then Regulus turned away.

"I'm going this way." He stated, pointing down the stairs, and Remus nodded stiffly, pointing in the other direction.

"I'm... yeah." he trailed off, embarrassed at himself for how awkward he was acting, and Regulus sent him a smile.

"It's been good talking with you... Remus." He said quietly, hurrying off down the great staircase and entering the dungeons through the door on the right. Remus watched him all the way until the door had closed, and then began to make his way up to the Gryffindor tower again, pondering on the younger Black, and whether Sirius and James had come to blows yet.

- X -

James had his head buried in his pillow, trying to see how long he could cut off his supply to air before he fainted, when he felt a stiff, cold hand on his shoulder. He lifted his head slightly, and turned to the side to see, out of Sirius and Peter, which one was going to attack. Would they curse, hex or jinx him? Or would they forgo the wands and just punch him like in the muggle brawls? He

locked eyes with Sirius. Although, instead of looking like he was going to attack James, he simply looked awkward. Said boy averted his gaze, a dusting of pink staining his cheeks.

"Stop... Don't beat yourself up so bad." The boy said, retracting his hand and glaring determinedly at the wall. He hopped lightly from foot to foot, and James sat up in bed, staring at his sheets, feeling even guiltier. "You know... it's not like you actually said werewolf." He added, folding his arms. Sirius didn't say sorry first. In fact, Sirius barely said sorry at all. So it was understandable that he was acting so uncomfortably.

"I still said it... I feel like shit." Replied James quietly. "I'm a fucking terrible friend."

Sirius rolled his eyes, sitting down on the bed next to James. He awkwardly patted the Quidditch player's back.

"I... You're a good friend." He said, "I baited you into saying that... I guess I'm the crap friend." He added, making James glare heatedly at the wall.

"Let's not turn this into an 'it's all my fault' fest shall we? You know as well as I do you'd jump off a freaking cliff for Remus" He replied, and Sirius smiled slightly.

"I know you'd never do anything to hurt Remus..." The Black heir said, he took a deep breath and then: "I'm sorry, about Snape... I'm a bad friend because I said those things about someone you... care about."

James looked at his lap, ears reddening at the idea.

"I don't care about him." He protested, and then squirmed when Sirius shot him a knowing look. "I just... He's talented."

Sirius nodded, smirking.

"You always had a thing for the smart ones." He teased.

"I just meant... what I said earlier. Other than the orders he's given me no reason to not be friendly. He's working on his own potions, and it's really impressive stuff." He confessed. "And you know we've not exactly been the kindest of people to him but he's willing to look past that and give me a second shot."

Sirius shifted on the bed, as if he couldn't get comfortable, which was unlikely to be the case as the Hogwarts mattresses were very soft.

"I get it. You have a strange need for literally everyone to like you." He replied. "I'll... I'll make an effort to be nice to him, if it makes you feel better."

James gave a short snort of amusement.

"That'd be something I'd pay to see."

Sirius laughed too.

"Bet you five galleons I can be nice to him for like... a whole week!" He challenged, and James rose an inquisitive eyebrow.

"You're on!" He said, quickly taking his friend's hand and shaking it. Sirius, who was grinning, let his face fall as he found his hand being shaken. He looked down at the two hands clasped together.

"What?"

"I said you're on!" James grinned, "And we shook. Five galleons say you couldn't be nice to Severus Snape for one week!"

Sirius blinked.

"Well then, don't go spending your cash twinkle-toes, because I can be very nice when I want to be."

James grinned. The two boys could never stay mad at each other for long, and he was excited to see how Sirius planned on making up for years' worth of bullying in a week.

Sanity

"Now remember. You have to be nice." Reminded James, on Monday morning, as the four marauders made their way down the grand staircase and into the entrance hall. A large group of Hufflepuffs were chatting animatedly and giggling near the doorway to the great hall, and James was having to basically shout to make himself heard over the din.

"I know already. Stop getting on at me." Replied Sirius moodily, glaring down at where the subject of their discussion was. Severus Snape was leaning casually against the stone wall in the entrance hall, next to the small door that lead down to the dungeons, talking in quiet tones to Lily Evans.

"I'm not getting on at you!" James yelled over the noise, although he knew he probably had been getting on at Sirius over the course of that morning and the previous evening. It was just that Sirius being kind to Severus was a big deal to him.

"You're so getting on at me!" Shot back Sirius.

"Sirius!" Shouted James in exhaustion.

"James!" Shouted Sirius right back.

"Both of you shut up."

The two bickering marauders stopped their argument instantly at this utterance from an under-the-weather looking Moony. The tallest marauder was glaring at them, also looking around the foyer at the unusual amount of commotion. He had yet to have his morning caffeine intake and was in a particularly bad mood. It had started the night before when Remus had returned to the dormitory flustered and grumpy; he'd been surprised to learn Sirius was going to be making an effort to be nicer to James' Slytherin savior, but doubted it would come to much – and was much more focused on what he'd realized at the top of the grand staircase with Regulus.

He had a crush on the younger boy.

The boys had asked him yesterday what was making their werewolf so surly, (Sirius with his usual abundance of pet names and compliments), but Remus had taken one look at the older Black heir, with his beater's muscles, and remembered how protective Sirius could be of his little brother. The sandy haired boy had simply mumbled 'boy troubles' at them, and allowed them to fluster over how they definitely did want to discuss Remus' sexual escapades, and how much it must be troubling the poor werewolf, however unfortunately they were waylaid with... insert excuse here. It was amazing how far the marauders would go not to discuss feelings of the romantic disposition.

"Sorry Remus." Muttered James, folding his arms and looking down at his shoes sulkily. Sirius murmured something which sounded like it could have been an apology, but could have just as easily have been as insult. Remus found he honestly didn't care either way.

"Whatever" He mumbled testily. He nodded over their shoulders to where Severus was still listening to Lily. She was chatting animatedly, using her hands to demonstrate things as Severus nodded along politely and interjected here and there with words of encouragement or ideas of a different way of thinking. Regulus had just materialized out of the wooden door leading down the dungeons and joined the twosome. He was taller than Lily, though not as tall as Snape, and Remus noticed that the elbow of his robes, that had been ripped last night in their fall, was still ripped this morning. The younger Black seemed to be everywhere around every corner and it was driving

Remus insane.

He shook off the rest of his thoughts on the younger Black, shifting uncomfortably from side to side as he reminded himself once again of the boy's age, and watched as Sirius determinedly detached themselves from their group and made his way over to the Slytherins and Lily. James watched carefully from their spot half way up the stairs, wondering what Sirius was going to do to prove he could be nice to the boy they had relentlessly bullied for years.

"Hey Sniv... Snape." The Gryffindor said, twitching his mouth upwards in what was probably supposed to be a smile but came out looking more like a grimace. Sirius then turned his attention to Lily, who had almost instinctively put herself between the two boys upon the appearance of a marauder. Sirius' grimace turned more genuine at the sight of her. "Lily." He said, voice going soft and warm. Severus cleared his throat.

"What do you want Black?" He asked. Sirius, for his part, wasn't in any way deterred by Severus' harsh tone. He took a moment to stop looking into Lily's distrustful eyes, and shuffled his feet, dipping his gaze in what could only be described as a shy way, as he turned his attention back to the Slytherin. Remus and James, from their spot a short distance away, both felt their mouths drop open slightly; Sirius really was a master of manipulation.

"You see..." Sirius said, a little quieter now, shooting a glance at his younger brother, who chose this moment to excuse himself and leave the party. Sirius clapped his hands behind his back and looked up at Snape through his lashes, despite being taller than the Slytherin. He seemed blissfully oblivious to the strange looks he was receiving from everyone around him. He swung his body very slightly, looking for all the world the picture of childish innocence. "Pete's off sick today, and Remus and James are definitely going to pair together in potions. James says you're very talented in potions so..." he trailed off, looking up hopefully to the lanky haired boy. Lily had backed down upon realizing Sirius wasn't there to start a fight. James shuffled awkwardly on his spot next to the Remus, flushing and looking down at his feet. Remus heard him mumble something about not wanting Snape to know James thought he was talented.

Severus had gone an unflattering and worrying pale colour, and had a confused look upon his features like he was trying to decide whether he should thank or hex Sirius.

"Why exactly are you telling me this Black?" He eventually asked, voice deep and unwavering.

It was obvious, from Remus' point of view, that Sirius was losing patience with his act. He'd pretended to be shy, innocent and in need of help, but Severus hadn't picked up on the hints and thus wasn't going to act the hero. At this point Sirius would either have to change tactics, or (more likely) throw a strop and end up owning James five galleons. He watched, amusedly, as Sirius attempted to up his ante even more.

"Well, I was thinking..." The beater said, licking his lower lip a little. "Would you be my partner today?"

Remus felt James tense at his side; the boy was clenching and unclenching his fists. The werewolf had no doubt that James thought his behavior was down to concern over his friend's ability to continue to be kind, but Remus knew jealousy when he saw it. Sirius was a natural flirt; even in his everyday conversation and the way he held himself the boy oozed sex-appeal. Remus knew from experience how horrible it could be to watch Sirius accidentally work his magic on someone you were interested in – whether you knew it or not.

Severus sent James a look over the Black heir's shoulder, and Remus watched as James sent back a shaky smile and small shrug.

"I don't care." The Slytherin eventually told Sirius, before striding away.

Sirius exchanged a few words under his breath with Lily, smiling much more naturally with her than he did with Snape, and waved her off before he returned to Remus and James, looking smug.

"See, I was nice." He said triumphantly.

"Fuck nice." James mumbled in reply, looking down at his shoes. He probably hadn't meant for his friends to hear it, but they had. Sirius glared at him.

"Which is to say?" He asked defensively. James crossed his arms.

"You were supposed to be nice to him, not freaking... seduce him or something." He whispered dramatically as the loud group of Hufflepuffs passed them on their way up the stairs. "That went way past nice! THAT Sirius... that was flirting." He added.

Sirius coughed slightly on his own saliva, looking at his best friend as if he'd just spouted an extra head.

"Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't flirt with that grease-ball. I'm just flirty by nature." He replied. Remus nodded his agreement, having just thought it himself. He knew James knew it too.

James recoiled slightly at the comment, blushing at the whole argument, and instead of having to look his friends in the eye, opting instead for studying the ground.

"I guess you're right, sorry..." He mumbled eventually. Sirius sniffed at his friend's antics, also looking away.

"Whatever James." He said, his voice coming out with a strained sort of good cheer, "Just keep in mind that jealousy doesn't become you."

It took James a little while to figure out what Sirius meant, and when he did, he couldn't quite find a come-back to retaliate with.

- X -

"Hooch is going to fry your ass with a well-placed fire spell if you don't get to her flying lesson."

Sirius Black stood in the entrance of the little lobby leading out to the grounds, hands in pockets, head slightly cocked to one side and a familiar attractive smirk on his porcelain features. He pushed himself off of the pillar he was leaning against to stride a step closer to the first years he was talking to, reveling in their scared expressions.

"Now." He added. It wasn't every day he took time out his busy schedule to offer advice to lost children, so he expected it to be headed. The small group fell over themselves, pushing at their friends as they rushed out into the grounds away from the imposing fifth year and in search of Hooch.

"Madame Hooch is lenient on first years and you well know it Black... besides, I'm going to fry your ass with a well-placed explosion spell if you don't stop picking on first years and get to potions."

Lily Evans placed her hands on her hips, an interestingly amused smile about her features, and looked down at Sirius from her spot - where he'd just been leaning not a moment before. She pursed her lips momentarily, before speaking again:

"Now."

Sirius ran a hand through his locks (something he'd recently picked up from James, apparently it was something about Lily that made boys want to play with their hair), and grinned widely. He gave a big, overly dramatic sigh and leant himself up against the wall again – putting his hands in his pockets once more so they wouldn't be tempted to fiddle.

"If I go to potions I'm likely to get my balls twisted rather painfully by a very jealous James." he argued, staring off in front of himself, he turned to smile once more at the red head before he spoke again. "And although it is a very tough decision Lily-Pookums, I value my balls more than my ass."

Lily rose a quick eyebrow at Sirius, coming to stand in front of him, and leaning back on to her heels.

"Why would Potter be jealous?" She asked, "And why would he..." She trailed off. She thought momentarily about being as blunt as Sirius had been, but decided ultimately she'd rather not. She was saved the displeasure of having to find a rewording of her question, however, when Sirius spoke.

"Well you see, Sugar-pops, there is someone in our potions class of which I have promised my partnership, and Jamie-poo isn't very happy about that arrangement."

Lily smiled now.

"I see, why did you ask Sev to partner you anyway? Just to get Potter jealous?"

Sirius shrugged in response, he gave her a short glance. It would be a difficult situation to explain – all about James' illness and his sudden desire to be friendly with the Slytherin bat.

"I enjoy a challenge." He eventually, cryptically, settled upon.

Lily laughed.

"I never thought of Potter as being so protective over his friends that he'd be jealous of Severus of all people! I mean, it's rather obvious you and he will never really see eye to eye."

Of course Lily thought that James would be jealous of Severus for having Sirius as a partner and not the other way around. That's what made more sense. James' weird, misguided friend-crush on Snape was nothing short of strange. He wanted to be able to talk to her about all the things that had been happening with James and Snape, and how unhappy he was about all of them – but it wasn't exactly his secret to tell, so instead he changed the subject.

"So... why aren't you in Potions?" He asked.

Lily, realising she'd effectively put herself in the metaphorical firing line of being caught out, blushed lightly and averted her gaze.

"I'm a prefect, I have duties." She rambled off an excuse; but Sirius didn't miss her trying to discretely push a small white envelope behind her back as she said it.

"What's this you've got here Lily-Pad?" He teased, before swiping the envelope out of her grasp, and holding it high, scanning it.

"Give it back!" Lily yelled the moment it had been snatched from her hands, flailing for it. Sirius

simply shifted his body so that she couldn't reach it. He ran a hand along the edge of the envelope to find it had already been opened, and wondered what was inside.

"Sirius, don't." Lily pleaded. There was no glare in her eyes, just a sad concern. Sirius spared her a considering look, wondering why she was so upset; he hadn't hurt her.

"A love note, perhaps?" He guessed, and Lily rolled her eyes, shaking her head.

"It's a letter from my parents." She admitted quietly, the hand that had been reaching her letter coming down dejectedly to clasp over her chest. Sirius blinked at the transformation, and almost instantly handed the envelope back. He ran a hand through his hair again, looking out into the grounds so that he didn't have to look at the redheaded prefect.

"That's not embarrassing at all." He mumbled, scratching at the back of his neck. "I wish... I wish I got letters from my parents." He added in confession, scuffing his shoe against the stone floor in an attempt to keep himself looking at anywhere but Lily. The girl bit her lip, knowing this was a sensitive subject.

"I thought you didn't like your parents." She voiced quietly, turning her body so she and Sirius was facing the same way, and leaning up against the wall. Sirius felt himself heat up slightly, and scuffed his feet more in embarrassment. He hated doing all this girly shit like talking about his feelings and stuff. But... he found it easier to talk to Lily than to his friends. James laughed off his want to be closer to his family by telling him that he had a new family in the Potters; Remus' problems always seemed so much worse than Sirius' that he found it hard to voice his concerns to the werewolf; and Peter was religiously matter of fact in his advice and was absolutely terrible if you needed someone to talk about your feelings with over a bowl of butterbeer flavoured ice cream.

"You're sister." He stated, coughing in a desperate attempt to get the subject off of himself. He motioned to the letter in her hand. "Did she write?"

Lily shook her head ruefully.

With James being so distracted with his deal with Snape, Sirius had found himself with an abundance of time on his hands. He had an excellent relationship with both Remus and Peter (they were all marauders together after all), but James was his brother in all but blood. Remus spent a lot of time studying in the library, obsessing over OWLS and Peter had a full-blown business of tutoring younger students that seemed to be taking up more and more of his time. Sirius had realized all of a sudden that unless he wanted to join the werewolf in the stuffy, hushed library, he would need to find someone else to hang out with for a bit. And then there had been Lily.

Lily who was sad because her sister didn't write, who was annoyed because Snape had taken a good amount of time out of lessons in their OWLS year and hadn't even told Lily where he'd been or what he'd been doing, and who was worried because the old traditions that kept them all sane in the ever-changing floor plan of Hogwarts, seemed to be coming to an end.

"Why don't you write to her." Sirius suggested, sliding down to a seated position with his back against the wall. Lily joined him a moment later. "Sometimes, even if it's not your fault, it's best to say sorry... I mean, I know you can't help how you were born, but she's scared and maybe a bit jealous and she might need a proper explanation." He added.

Lily hugged her knees.

"She's very stubborn." She said, almost as if trying to find something bad to say about her. They

fell into a small silence, until Lily said. "Why don't you write to your parents?"

Sirius stiffened at the question.

"It's not really that easy." He replied.

"How can you tell me to be the first to say sorry, if you won't follow your own advice?" Lily challenged. Sirius sighed, sending her a guilty look.

"Because it's not the same." He said. "It's hard to explain... I want to be close to my family but I'm not willing to give in to what their ideals of a good son is..."

Lily frowned.

"What do you mean?" She asked quietly.

Sirius grinded his teeth together, looking out into the grounds.

"My family are big supporters of the blood purity movement... and fuck, I know I shouldn't want to be close to them when that's what they're like but..." He trailed off, unsure of how to say what he wanted to say. Lily was muggleborn, it was a horrible thing to tell her he wanted to reconnect with his family who would like nothing more than to see her and every one of her blood wiped from the earth.

Lily placed a hand on his shoulder.

"But they're family." She supplied.

Confessions

James was awake long before he opened his eyes, in that sleep-fueled haze between realities and dreaming, where sometimes reality became very confusing. He crinkled his brow as he took in his surroundings using the senses he had left to him, before he would concede to opening his eyes. There was something cold and hard pressing into one side of his body, and he wriggled his toes to see they were met with little resistance – the fabric of his socks maybe, but no floor – so he must be lying down. Had he slept on the floor? His head pounded as he attempted to sift through this information, and he tried to piece together his broken memories of the night before. He could feel the all too familiar blanket of heat settling over him as he travelled further into the land of the awake, and realized that it must be Friday.

He slowly opened his eyes and felt around himself for his glasses, slipping them on to his face the moment his hand closed around their cool metal frames. He looked upwards to see the looming form of Severus Snape standing over him, and a faint look of worry etched into his features. More than a month had passed in relative peace – James taking the Elixir that was made for him every week, and the two of them working together in a begrudging comradery on the Wolfsbane potion. They'd entered December with little commotion, and the holidays had been fast approaching.

They'd been given Friday off, James remembered, in order to pack. And of course the Marauders had made this a special occasion to throw one of their famous Gryffindor parties. The drinking and partying seemed to have done a number on him, however – and his memories of the night before were at best broken, and at worst completely non-existent. He felt himself tense as he thought about what possibilities might have occurred which would have led to him sleeping on the floor of Severus' work room; but more insistent than anything was the incapacitating heat that had penetrated him.

"Calm down." Severus ordered, his voice soft but firm, and somehow aware of James' panic without the Gryffindor showing any outward signs. Almost immediately James felt himself become calm. Severus shoved a small container of potion towards him, and James took it gratefully, instantly recognizing the contents as the painkiller Snape gave him every week. The flames that felt like they had spread over his limbs seemed to lower in intensity, but not altogether disappear; and the Gryffindor wondered whether he was beginning to develop an immunity to the painkiller.

"It's still hot..." James mumbled, sitting up despite his muscles protesting.

"That might just be your hangover." Severus muttered back, sitting himself down on the sofa and surveying the boy in front of him. "You barely eat – you have to accommodate for that in your alcohol intake."

James looked at his feet, noticing how his shoes had been taken off and placed neatly to one side, and how the jacket he'd been wearing the night before had also been removed and folded. He highly doubted he had done that whilst drunk, and could feel himself heating up at the thought of Severus undressing and looking after him.

"I'm sorry." He whispered gently. "I didn't mean to cause you any trouble."

James had found over the last month or so that his and Severus' relationship worked, and was pleasant, just as long as he kept obviously on the side of caution. He kept himself polite and civil, always completed orders to the best of his ability and tried not to bother the Slytherin with anything unless it directly related to Wolfsbane. In return, Severus allowed him to feel a part of the progress of the potion, and was often slow to suggest James leave once they were done – making way for long, comfortable silences where James could enjoy having Severus to himself. He didn't want to set back any progress they'd made with some stupid drunken slurs.

"You have permission to look into my Pensive in order to help you with your memory of last night." Severus supplied, glossing over James' apology. He waved towards a small wooden bowl sitting on a table in one corner of the room – a mass of silver swirling liquid captured inside. James gazed at it in wonder; he'd heard of Pensives before, and he had seen one or two, but he'd never imagined a fellow student might own one.

"How come you have one?" He asked, standing up and making his way towards it. He looked over his shoulder to see Severus shrug.

"I inherited it." He confessed, and his eyes became steely as he looked just over James' shoulder to where it was sat on the table. James turned again and stared at it longingly – wondering just how many memories of the Slytherin's were trapped inside it, but eventually, he shook his head.

"I just want to know one thing..." He spoke, shyly looking down at the dungeon floor and scuffing his feet. He glanced up to see a rather impatient looking Severus. He coughed embarrassedly. "Did I... say anything... weird?"

Snape thought back to the night before, when James had stumbled into his work room, waking him from his slumber at just past one in the morning. The boy was an absolute mess – his hair sticking up at odd angles, his glasses barely hanging off the end of his nose, and his skinny limbs unable to fully hold him upright, so that he was leaning heavily on the wall for support. Severus knew that alcohol had a negative effect on the symptoms of Cinis, having seen it before in Alex Kemp, and thought it would especially affect James as he was so effected by the disease. He had known instantly the boy would regret his partying when he awoke the next morning, and would be unable to fully focus on his memories of the night before.

He crossed his arms over his chest at James' questioning gaze, and found himself unable to keep eye-contact.

"I think it best you look in the pensive." He eventually replied, and without waiting for a response excused himself through the wooden door that sometimes lead to a bathroom and at other times a kitchen. James watched him go with a concerned look, only glancing back at the small wooden bowl with swirling silver liquid inside. So he had said something weird.

He took the few steps over to the bowl and watched as the liquid inside swirled and jumped and rearranged itself until he was looking down on a scene unfolding in its confines – as if it was reading his thoughts and knew exactly what memory he wanted, he saw himself crash through the workroom door, and (deciding he should at least do this right) he took a deep breath, and plunged his head into the liquid.

James crashed through the workroom door, hiccupping as if surprised at himself, and Severus sat up heavily on the sofa he was asleep on – throwing the covers away to stand. He was clothed only in loose fitting pajama bottoms, with the draw string pulled tight, and nothing else – showing off his pale, lightly muscled stomach. His slightly too long toes poked out under the oversized hem of

his trousers, and his tensed arms had a light dusting of pale freckles running up them. James looked him up and down appreciatively.

"What are you doing here?" Severus asked, voice hoarse from sleep. He pulled his wand out from the pocket of his pajama bottoms and cast a spell in the air without speaking. Luminous green numbers fell from the end – alerting them both the time was 1:23 AM. "And at this time?" Severus amended, after squinting through the room's darkness at the glow in the dark numbers, which were rapidly disappearing into nothingness.

James giggled, holding his stomach and leaning heavily against the wall for support. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and ran a hand through his already disheveled hair.

"It's Christmas Sev! We're all packing and..." He stopped, frowning at himself, as if debating whether he should say the next thing or not. Evidently his drunken mind won out, as he opened his mouth to speak again; "I wanted to see you before we go."

Severus cast his wand towards the wall behind James' head, and suddenly a wall of wax candles that James had never noticed before flickered into life, bathing the room in a romantic, soft light. James pushed himself off the wall and almost stumbled forward, but managed to catch himself on the back of the sofa. He gave another loud hiccup.

"You could see me later at the feast." Severus reminded him, voice beginning to return to his usual, cool baritone. James just shook his head slowly from side to side, sliding around the edge of the sofa so that he was closer to the Slytherin.

"I wanted to see you alone." He murmured, convincing his feet to take him even closer to the shirtless boy, until Severus had to shoot his arms out and catch the Gryffindor from falling. They stood in an awkward half-hug for a moment, before James placed his hands on Severus' chest, and forced himself to look up into the boy's black eyes. "Did you not want to see me?" He asked, his voice small and tremulous.

Snape frowned at him, brow creasing in concentration.

"I... I will see you after Christmas." He stated. "And you will be in regular correspondence with me, every Friday – for the Elixir. You have nothing to worry about." He added.

James poked his tongue out, scrunching up his nose in a fit of childish annoyance.

"I don't care about the Elixir." He said, pushing their bodies even closer together so that James' arms could circle up around Severus' neck, and Severus' arms became slack – where they had been holding the Gryffindor up, and no longer needed to. The Slytherin stood stock still as James leaned in closer, standing on his tiptoes and bringing his cheek uncomfortably close to Severus' oversized nose. "I care about you." He finally added, breath ghosting over Severus' ear.

Severus tensed visibly at the words, lips thinning. He placed his hands over James' hips, fully intent on pushing the boy away, but James seemed to take this as an invitation and leant slightly backwards, so he had better access to complete his next move.

A heady kiss; pulling Severus down by his neck, taking him by surprise so that he almost instantly responded to the affection, his hands going limp on James' hips. James' lips were warm and soft against his, and tasted like fire-whiskey.

They stayed that way for a moment or two, until Severus came to his senses and pushed the boy away. James stumbled as a result of combining alcohol with Cinis, and where Severus would

usually have caught him, this time he let the boy fall backwards, on to his back.

He looked up at Severus with a hurt expression. Severus looked away.

"You're inebriated." He stated. James shrugged. He tried to get back on his feet but was struggling to stand. Severus knelt next to him, and put a firm hand on his shoulder. He helped him out of his shoes, glasses and shirt, folding the shirt and placing the items neatly to one side. Then he dragged the blanket off his sofa and tucked it over the Gryffindor, who had flopped onto the floor and was beginning to breathe rhythmically.

"Hey Sev?" The boy asked quietly. Severus grunted to show he had heard. "Let's not... let's not talk about this. Ever." He suggested. Severus nodded.

"I promise." He replied, but James' breathing had already evened out and his eyes had closed. Severus settled himself back on the sofa and mentally prepped himself for a sleepless night.

James felt himself being jerked back into the workroom at present day, the memory that had been stored had evidentially ended and the Pensive had rejected him. He felt a familiar heat creep back into him, the flames that were held at bay each week by the Elixir burst into life again in his stomach, reaching upwards towards his ribcage. It had been strange enough to see himself walking around drunk, then to watch himself make such a fool of himself, was icing on the cake.

So he hadn't so much as said something weird, as he had blown Severus out of the water with weirdness! He'd kissed the Slytherin, he realized, bringing up a hand to ghost his fingers over his own lips. His ears turned red at the idea, even as a pool of disappointment settled in his stomach – he'd kissed the Slytherin; the thing he'd been reluctantly dreaming about for the last few months... and he couldn't even remember it.

Through all this the one thing that made the flames inside him jump higher, sparking anger in him, was that Severus had promised not to talk about it, in an agreement to try and forget it had ever happened – but instead of doing that he had immortalized the memory in a Pensive and thought it a right laugh to send James off to relive his embarrassment. His brow creased in anger, and he turned on his heel, crossing the room in purposeful strides, and knocking on the wooden door Severus had disappeared behind with fever. He waited a moment, and then pushed his way inside.

He instantly regretted his decision when he pushed open the door to reveal the bathroom on the other side. Severus was stood in the middle of the floor, having obviously just exited the shower, as he was dripping wet and completely naked. He dived for the small towel hanging over a rail, and wrapped it around his crotch protectively, but it was far too late – James had seen more than enough, and knew the image would plague his sexually frustrated dreams for months. His cheeks instantly flamed and he forgot what he had come into the room for to begin with, standing rigidly still in the doorway, unable to get his feet to cooperate with him.

Severus watched him for a moment, making sure his towel was securely tied around himself, slung over his hip bones and ending just before his knees, even with the towel, the image was intoxicating. Severus had an impressively defined iliac crest, and a teasing trail of dark curls that started from his belly button and disappeared under the towel. The water from his shower was still trickling down all over his body and his lank hair was tangled thanks to a thorough cleaning. The Slytherin took the strides towards his companion and closed the door to the bathroom behind him. Suddenly the bathroom felt very small, and the air very recycled. Severus leant one hand on the door behind James' head, trapping the Gryffindor between the door that wouldn't open and the Slytherin himself. James swallowed noticeably.

"Do you like what you see?" Severus asked, eyes burning with unspoken anger, but voice calm and

deep. James took in a deep breath, suddenly smelling the nondescript unbranded shampoo and body-wash. He couldn't lie, he'd just watched the re-runs of the evidence to the contrary. Slowly, excruciatingly reluctantly, he nodded.

Severus smirked. The same smirk that was equal parts evil and sex-appeal.

"And here I was thinking you just wanted to be friends." The Slytherin joked, voice going quieter and quieter. He brought up his free hand, the one not keeping the door closed, and traced James' lips with his thumb. The experience was over-sensitive.

"I want to be friends." James said, sounding braver than he felt. He attempted to push the other boy's hand away. "I can't deny I'm... fascinated by you. But it's not like... a crush or something." He added, looking away.

"Do you kiss everything you're fascinated by?" Severus replied, lips twitching back into a smirk. He had dealt with four years of bullying and wasn't going to let James get off that easily. If the boy really did have feelings for Severus, then it was time he got some payback. "Don't lie to me."

James glared at the ground, anger flicking through him again at Severus' familiar smirk. The bastard knew the answer to every question he was asking and just wanted to put James on edge – wanted to play with him. James started to doubt whether Severus had ever been civil with him for the sake of friendship at all, or whether it was all just a complicated mind game made to send him insane.

He cursed under his breath.

"If you don't have an order for me today do you mind letting me leave?" He asked, trying to keep his voice civil and calm. With Severus' hand firmly on the door he had no chance of escape, but he needed to leave before he said or did something else he would regret.

Severus, however, made no move to remove his hand.

"I have no order for you. But you never answered my question." He teased. "I don't expect lies James. From now on you are to answer all my questions when asked. You are never to lie to me."

James bit his lip. He knew it. Severus only wanted him to answer the question so he could embarrass him with the answer.

"That was never part of our deal." He muttered. "I do your orders, you make the Elixir. What I think and feel, what secrets I keep – that's up to me."

Severus smirked, and James thought he might actually go weak at the knees. The amount of power behind that smirk had goosebumps spring up along his arms.

"I'm altering our deal. What you think and feel, all your secrets – they belong to me now." He pushed himself ever so slightly further into James' personal space, and lowered his voice further. "If you lie to me; if you keep things from me – it will incur punishment."

James shivered, but even as he debated telling the Slytherin to go fuck himself, he knew it was futile. Severus had all the cards, and James didn't even know what game they were playing. He sighed, looking down at his feet.

"I don't... I don't kiss everything that fascinates me, no." He confessed. "But you're different. Everything you do makes me nervous. Every time you speak, or move... or don't speak, or don't move. All of it, makes my stomach do flips. I want to know everything about you, and I want you

to forgive me for bullying you. I want to find out what it is that makes me so scared to be around you." He stopped, bowing his head so that his fringe fell over his eyes.

"You're scared?" Severus replied, smirk back in full. "That's not very Gryffindor of you." James just shook his head.

"Yes. I'm fucking terrified. I thought... I thought it was just a case of being worried you'd stop making the Elixir, and yes – of course I'm scared about that, but this is more than that... I'm worried you'll never see me as more than the boy who bullied you. I'm trying so hard to change, and I walk on eggshells around you – but you're still pulling crap like this!"

"Crap like what?" Severus defended. "You kissed me last night, remember?"

James winced at the reminder, but didn't let it stop him.

"I did kiss you." He said, tripping over the words slightly as they felt foreign to say when speaking to the Slytherin. "But you're the one holding it over my head. I confess I am obsessed with how you see me. I'm constantly scared you're going to reject me – but I'm still enjoying the ride. It's like... like I'm scared in a good way. Like when you're on a roller coaster ride, or watching a horror movie. You think you're about to die if you spend even one more second on that ride, with your heart beating out of your chest, but you can't bring yourself to scream for it to stop... because deep down you're having fun."

Severus shifted so that his naked body was slightly closer to James', and the Quidditch player had to raise his head and look upwards so he wasn't tempted to look where he shouldn't.

"I am attracted to you." He carried on, mumbling. "I don't know why, but I am. I don't know if it's just a reaction to Cinis, or if it's genuine, but I am. I don't like the idea of you knowing it. I know you'll just hold it over my head again; like the bullying, and the kiss, and walking in on you. But I don't want to stop what we have because I made a drunken mistake. I like working on Wolfsbane with you. I like finding ways to make your orders fun, I like helping you finish your charms homework once we've spent hours on Wolfsbane and the fumes are making me dizzy. I like you reminding me to eat, and helping me keep Cinis a secret from everyone. I like that you told me I should always come early to collect the Elixir in case I get dizzy on the way, and that you teach me new ways to prepare ingredients for classes so Slughorn doesn't get on my back for not being too near the cauldrons. I like... knowing you've got my back."

Severus removed his hand from the door, more out of shock than acceptance. He hadn't realized that he and James had become as close as that. Had they really gone, in just a few months from a bully and the bullied to having each other's back? James opened the door and stole outside, and before Severus could call him back, he heard the other door close and James' feet walking swiftly out of the workroom.

Damn, he thought.

Hangover

Whilst Severus was left alone in his workroom, pondering on what in Merlin's name a rollercoaster was, James was taking the long walk back to Gryffindor common room. Breakfast had been and done and now the few witches and wizards that had spent the night outside of their own dorms were finally beginning to sneak back to where they belonged. James realized that now he was one of the many teenagers in the castle taking the walk of shame after a hard night's partying, and quelled the queasiness in his stomach at the idea of it. The heat he had felt that morning upon waking up was circling inside him menacingly, running through his veins and making little beads of sweat appear on the back of his neck as he climbed staircase after staircase back up to the Gryffindor tower.

The Marauders would want to know where he had been last night, they would question his absence and expect to hear some girl's name in response. They might even ask for details if their own nights had been comparatively disappointing; but James had no details to give – he could hardly tell them he had spent the night at Severus, and yes he had received a full frontal eye-full, but the kiss he had given Severus the night before had been thrown back in his face. He wanted to be able to tell his friends what he was going through; but even Remus, who was by far the most sensible choice for matters of repressed sexuality, would be unlikely to understand that James didn't have a crush on Severus, per se, but a deep obsession with him, that manifested in wet dreams and a longing for his company.

Fuck. He definitely had a crush on the Slytherin.

Even he could admit it now. He'd gone to see Severus the night before because he was not looking forward to having a month off over Christmas without the dungeon dweller, he'd confessed he cared about the boy, and had even kissed him – only to be rejected. He sighed, leaning heavily against a wall outside the medical wing, and bringing a hand up to the back of his neck where a cold pool of sweat was beginning to form. His hair was almost damp from it, and he was gasping of thirst, his mouth dry and throat sore. He wiped a forearm over his brow and tried to keep himself upright, leaning against the wall.

"Prongs?" He heard, and he opened the eyes he hadn't realized he had closed, head smarting and vision swimming, he looked through the haze to see Pete standing beside him, a look of concern on his boyishly attractive face. "Hey mate, what's up?" asked the other teen, holding out an arm, which James took gratefully. The two of them made their way slowly and clumsily back up to Gryffindor tower, and James took a few deep breaths before he could form a coherent sentence.

"Just tired. It's Friday." He excused, leaning heavily on his friend. "Combine Cinis with a hangover and this is what you get." He tried to joke, but noticed that Pete didn't laugh, and he himself didn't find it funny at all. He was too busy concentrating on keeping his feet moving. As they approached the portrait hole James detached himself from Pete, knowing what the fat lady was like when it came to the health of her students. He didn't want her sending word to Pomphrey that he was feeling under the weather. He swayed slightly on his feet but was able to correctly recite the right password and the portrait let them in without any protest.

He made his way agonizingly slowly up to the dorm he shared with the other Marauders, closely followed by Pete, and breathed a sigh of relief when the room turned out empty. He had every need for a comfortable bed without the questions about where he'd been and what he had been doing the night before.

"Are you okay?" Pete asked hesitantly, as James lowered himself on to his bed with a painful

groan. James nodded lightly, trying not to upset his aching head, and surveyed the room. It was a mess; covered in bottles of fire-whiskey and other cheap alcohol, not to mention the amount of general rubbish and half-eaten pumpkin pasties. James spotted an unopened box of Bertie's Beans and decided to open it, slipping one into his mouth and thanking his lucky stars when he got a normal flavor; strawberry. "You know, when you didn't come back last night we got a little worried." Pete carried on, sitting down on his own bed, after shifting some rubbish. James attempted a casual laugh, laying back in an attempt to ease his aching joints.

"You guys were partying as well." He excused himself, staring blankly at the canopy of his four poster, and wishing he would be blessed with a deep sleep without any sex-fueled dreams of Severus.

"Yeah." Agreed his friend. "But you don't usually get so drunk." He added. There was a teasing tone to his voice that suggested even before turning up at Severus' work room he had made himself out to be a fool among the Gryffindors. James couldn't deny that Pete was right, it was very unlike him to be such a light weight, usually he was the last of the marauders to get tipsy, even if they evenly drank the same amount – he was sober long after everyone else had descended into stupidity.

"I'm already feeling the effects, you don't have to tell me." He replied, "Besides, you were also doing the walk of shame this morning, I note." He added, despite his mouth going dry and his joints screaming out for sleep.

"Well, it's not like it's a crime." Pete argued back, and James smiled slightly, even though Pete probably wasn't looking at him.

"That's my point exactly." He said, "I won't ask you where you were if you don't ask me where I was?" He suggested.

"Go to bed with a ten and wake up with a four?" Pete asked back, but when James made no move to comment he sighed and said: "Alright, don't say."

A cold, tense air settled over the room as the two boys fell into silence. James closed his eyes and tried to will himself off to sleep, despite the heat circulating him and the aches in his joints and head. Peter stood and excused himself from the room not long after that.

-X-

For Peter, it felt as if James was more and more unwilling to share his life with the marauders; in fact none of the Marauders were sharing with each other the way they had used to. Since the term had begun it had become increasingly obvious that the Marauders were beginning to grow apart. Sure, they all still shared a room, and had classes together – they ate together and sometimes pulled pranks together, but they spent more time apart than ever before, and were emotionally very distant from each other. Peter knew this was all part of the deal with growing up, but the marauders had taken him in to their group when he was small, new to Hogwarts and at a loss; and he had no wish to lose his friends just yet. His friends had all found new friends, and he was getting left behind.

James was becoming closer and closer to Snape, despite the fact that Snape held James' life in the palms of an ever closing fist, and no matter how much James thought he was hiding his misguided crush on the Slytherin – they all knew. Sirius had sprung up a tentative friendship with Lily Evans, now that the absence of James made it easier for the two of them to just talk, and Remus was all the more fussing over OWLs and their future, to the point where he was a drain to be around.

He'd been approached by Lucius, Narcissa and Bellatrix not long after the beginning of the year.

They explained that they wanted him to relay information on the Marauders to them. The Marauders were, after all, the most popular group in school, and the Slytherins saw them going on to do great things after school – they wanted to be a part of that, and thus needed Pete's help. Pete had originally refused, but once they had explained that the Marauders were obviously growing apart, and if he chose to be their spy then they would offer him their friendship instead, he had found it easier to just agree. Besides – he doubted he was hurting anyone by giving the Slytherin's tidbits of information about the daily lives of the Marauders. The most interesting thing he had told them was that James was ill.

Still, he'd noticed recently that the Slytherins were beginning to ask more and more what his plans were for after school – had he any career choices? What were his views on muggleborns getting the same jobs that he would have to compete with them for? Had he ever thought about joining the fight with the Dark Lord?

Lucius' powers of persuasion were strong, and he made a lot of good points. The more muggleborns they let in to Hogwarts, the less of an education real witches and wizards got. Muggles were barbaric, walking around with their guns and polluting the earth with their cars. Why should he have to give up his freedom to accommodate them? Why were wizards, the obviously superior race, living in hiding from ignorant muggles?

He put those thoughts to the back of his mind. He still had time to put some serious thinking into the subject, but for now he had to focus on the issue at hand. The Marauders. They were obviously distracted by their new friends – it seemed obvious that all he had to do was get the Marauders back together by eliminating the competition.

Snape and Lily would have to go. If Peter could get the Marauders back together, then he wouldn't have to deal with the issue of having Lucius as a friend, and any Dark Lord connection that came with that. If he failed the Marauders continued down the path of growing apart, then he could think about what side of the muggleborns debate he stood on.

- X -

"Remus!"

The werewolf turned, blinking in surprise as the younger of the Black sibling approached him at a run. Seeing as they'd been given the Friday off for packing, the Black heir had obviously already put his school robes in his trunk, because now he was dressed in immaculate, perfectly fitting grey suit trousers, a deep crimson shirt and a matching grey waistcoat. His black shiny shoes clacked on the stone floor as he made his way towards Remus. Remus swallowed audibly – if he'd thought the thirteen year old was attractive before, under his flowing school robes, he realized it was no match for the attraction he now had for the younger boy.

Regulus came to a stop in front of him, and clutched at his right arm as he looked up at the tall werewolf.

"Are you alright?" Remus asked, the corridors were teeming with children and teachers all milling about, making their way into the Great Hall for lunch, and he was wary of being caught being friendly with the Slytherin by Sirius, who had a habit of thinking everyone was out to take advantage of his younger brother. Which in this case, Sirius probably had every right to be concerned.

"Fine." Regulus responded, his voice carrying in little more than a whisper, as he let go of his arm and also looked around the busy foyer. He carried on without looking up at the werewolf, opting instead to casually lean against the staircase banister in a way that was eerily reminiscent of Sirius.

"I need to tell you something... it's about your friend."

Remus' eyebrows shot into his hairline at the comment, and deciding to take his lead from the younger, stuck his hands in his jeans pocket and kept his gaze focused on a couple of Ravenclaw girls, who were shooting sparks out of the ends of their wands to entertain themselves.

"Which friend?" He asked, muttering it out of the side of his mouth.

"Pettigrew" Regulus replied, his lips thinning.

"Is he okay?" Remus asked hesitantly. Peter was more than capable of looking after himself, but if Regulus was worried, Remus found himself inexplicably mirroring those feelings.

"He's fine." Regulus said, brow creasing in a way that suggested a lot of concentration. He shrugged before saying: "At the moment."

Although he had already made up his mind to not look at the younger boy, Remus felt his neck crick round to peer intensely at the young Slytherin. Regulus was still looking resolutely in the other direction, still leant nonchalantly against the banister with the type of restful grace only the Black boys could achieve.

"I shouldn't really tell you this." Regulus carried on, fiddling with the cuff of his shirt, which came to rest perfectly where his wrist turned to palm. He glanced up and down the corridor. "Just tell Pettigrew that he's in too deep. They won't let him out now."

Remus was about to push for more information about this, but Regulus was already hurrying up the grand staircase and disappearing around the corner. Remus watched him go wistfully, feeling like he'd become a part of something shady, and on edge about it. He jumped when a voice from behind him once again called his name.

"Remus!" The werewolf turned once more to see Peter waving at him, jogging the last few steps until they were a comfortable distance to talk. "Was that Sirius' little brother?" He asked. Remus nodded dumbly.

"He actually had a message for you." He confessed. "Something about you being in too deep and them not letting you out?"

Peter's expression hardened at these words, and Remus wanted to ask what he'd been caught up in, but before he could open his mouth to ask the boy had laughed and waved it off.

"I literally have no idea what he's talking about." He joked, muttering something about most of the Black's being a little bit mad due to inbreeding. Remus wanted to believe this was true, but he had seen the boy's expression, and he couldn't help but believe Regulus was not mad at all.

-X-

James awoke again much later. The room was bathed into darkness, but it was not yet late enough for the other Marauders to have returned back to the dormitory for their last night in the familiar four posters before Christmas. No doubt they were saying lengthy goodbyes to classmates and enjoying treacle tart at the end of term feast. Severus would also be there, sat at the Slytherin table – would he be wondering where James was?

He blinked himself into being awake and registered after a moment that he was completely blind, and in a furnace. A rush of panic flooded through him as he realized it was Friday, and he could be late to get the Elixir. He stood from his four-poster in one fluid moment, and went to take a step in

order to rush down to the dungeons, but almost instantly lost balance, falling. He hit the edge of Sirius' bed on the way down with his forehead, and a splitting pain filled his head almost instantly. He rolled on to his stomach onto the wooden floorboards of Gryffindor tower, and felt the sticky flow of blood clotting above his left eye.

An excruciating pain was running through his body, permeating every inch of his skin, right down to the tips of his fingers and toes. He could feel beads of sweat on the back of his neck that seemed to evaporate from him the moment they formed, leaving him unnaturally dry. The roof of his mouth was ridged with dehydration; his eyes refused to water despite the pain; his heart was pumping double-time in his chest, pushing boiling blood around his veins.

This was it. He was going to catch fire.

As he thought this he faintly registered a door slamming open somewhere above him – and cool hands maneuvering his shoulders so that he was laying on his back. He felt long fingers open his mouth and a liquid being poured into it. The liquid was thick, and glacial, and as it passed his throat he felt it calm the flames there, sending them back into his stomach. A strange, unnatural shiver ran through his body and he curled instinctively into the strong body who was holding him still. Cool, long-fingered hands carded through his hair as he felt himself slip back into unconsciousness.

- X -

The next time James opened his eyes he was almost instantly presented with his glasses, and he registered that this time he was back in the comfortable confines of his four-poster. The heat inside him had subsided for another week and he was left with a fleeting feeling of helplessness from the experience. Pete was leaning against his bedside table and had been the one to hand him his glasses – and as he slipped them on his face he noticed Remus was sat on the edge of his mattress by his feet, and that Sirius was pacing up and down the side of his bed.

Sirius stopped pacing when he realized James was awake.

"Oh Merlin, are you okay?" He gasped, squatting down and putting a cool hand to his forehead. James batted it away.

"I'm fine." He said, voice coming out raspy. "Severus... bought the Elixir to me?" He asked, although he already knew the answer. He would know those long, bony fingers anywhere. Pete nodded.

"He rushed up here after the feast, gave a bunch of the first years a fright, standing outside the portrait yelling about how he needed to see you." He explained.

"We met him outside, and convinced the fat lady to let him in." Remus added. He blew out a deep breath through his nose. "God, when we saw you on the floor... I was worried."

Sirius snorted in a way that suggested he had been far more than just worried.

"Snape says you're not to drink anymore." The Black heir mumbled, getting comfy on his knees next to James' bed. James opened his mouth to protest, but the steely look in Sirius eyes was enough to keep him quiet. Sirius carried on in a small voice. "We... we could have lost you tonight buddy... I owe Snape for coming up here to save you, so I'm reinforcing his rules here."

James nodded along numbly, registering the pain in his head where he had split it open on Sirius' bed. He looked over to see his own blood stained on the wooden post.

Maybe not drinking wouldn't be so bad, if that was the result of drinking.

X

Later that evening, with James tucked neatly up in bed, and the rest of the marauders busy with packing away their last minute possessions, Sirius found himself stood awkwardly in the entrance hall, pulling at the cuffs of his deep purple shirt and feeling a little too overdressed as he watched his classmates milling around in jeans and t-shirts. It was a curse of being a Black, that most of their muggle-wear was undoubtedly formal – waist coats, tailored trousers and button-down shirts, as opposed to trainers and jeans. Sirius would usually be clad in his trademark leather jacket, but it had been packed away in his trunk and this was the only outfit he'd left out. Now, he felt painstakingly self-conscious in the attire.

He spotted Lily coming down the staircase long before she saw him, her red hair swaying naturally against her shoulders, and her kitten heels clicking rhythmically against the marble flooring. She honestly was a sight to behold – with slender legs, a shapely body and flawless skin, and ever since it had become increasingly apparent to Sirius that James was no longer interested, he found himself looking at her far more often than he would have dared before.

She smiled as she came into ear shot, and spoke his name softly.

"Hey." He mumbled in response, hand jumping to his hair automatically. He made a mental note never to tease James about the habit again, as it was obviously a side-effect of spending time with Lily Evans.

Lily held up the note he had sent her, where he could see his own scratchy handwriting asking her to meet him at the spot they were currently stood, and gave him a questioning glance. Sirius nodded at the paper, and lead her outside by her elbow. It was cold in the grounds, and their steps made deep footprints in the snow as they went further away from the castle.

"Is there something you wanted to tell me?" Lily asked, crossing her arms around each other and trying to rub some warmth into them. Sirius nodded, determinedly staring anywhere but her. He grumbled for a moment before replying.

"I..." He sighed. "I wanted to say that... if your home life isn't that great this Christmas... You can – you can write to me."

It hadn't been how he wanted to say it at all. He wanted to ask if they could keep in touch over the break, for a month seemed like an incredibly long time, but he hadn't wanted to mention her difficult home life – he had wanted to keep things light and airy. Lily bit her lip, folding her hands in front of her delicately.

"Thank you." She replied. She shifted her feet uncomfortably, which was much harder to do in the inches of snow they were buried in, and frowned down at them. "You should write to me." She eventually exclaimed.

Sirius shot her a short, surprised look.

"I will." He muttered. "If you want."

Lily nodded.

"Only if... if you feel you want to." She mumbled back, turning away. "It won't bother me if you don't."

Sirius frowned at his own feet at this addition, but reached out and rested a hand on the red-head's shoulder.

"Thanks, Lily."

Broadsands Bay

The Potter household was covered from head to toe in Christmas lights and decorations when James and Sirius arrived. Fleamont was grinning expectantly at the two of them, gesturing at the mess of holly wreathes, fake reindeer and fairy lights. Euphemia put an arm around both the boys, rolling her eyes at her husband and pushing them along the snowy garden path.

"It's supposed to look like any other muggle house for Christmas!" Fleamont explained, but even as they passed James noticed one of the Christmas garden gnomes was doing a jolly dance that no muggle gnome could achieve.

As they entered the entrance hall an explosion of live doves rose from the welcome mat, flew into the air and disappeared into a puff of red and green sparkles, making James jump backwards in surprise, into Sirius, who had to drop his case to catch his friend.

"I told you that was far too much Fleamont!" Euphemia scolded, ushering the two teenagers further inside and, once the door was firmly closed, levitating their cases up the stairs, around the corner and into their shared bedroom. "Now boys, let's get some dinner in you and you can tell me all about how your first term has been." She added, pocketing her wand and leading them into the kitchen.

They sat down heavily at the rustic table in the center, whilst Euphemia busied herself with pots and pans. Fleamont sat down next to Sirius and patted him on the back warmly.

"Go on then boys. Give us the numbers." He chuckled fondly. It was tradition that they come back at Christmas with the number of all the detentions they had had in their first term, and pretended to promise to do better next year. They all knew that there was no chance they would do better the next year, and it had become a bit of a joke in the Potter household.

Sirius proudly proclaimed his 'eleven!', but James felt a strange sense of shame in his own number and looked down at his toes shyly.

"Just two." He mumbled. There was a loud clatter from the direction of sink, and they all looked up to see Euphemia had dropped the pans she was juggling and had turned to face her family.

"Did I hear that right?" She asked, and when James nodded she broke into an uncontrollable smile, crossed the room and swept James up into a hug. "Oh my goodness, I can't believe after all this time you're actually calming down." She gushed. The Quidditch player knew that reasonably his mother's pride should cause him happiness, but he couldn't shake the feeling of shame.

The only thing that had changed in the year was that James had become ill, and he no longer acted horribly towards a certain Slytherin. Last year the amount of detentions he came home with totaled sixteen, and this year it was only two. It felt like a reinforcement that the year before he had been far too much of a jerk.

He reminded himself that if sixteen detentions were proof of being a jerk, then two was actually a significant improvement, and felt himself smiling at his mother's gushing.

Eventually she went back to getting things ready for dinner, and Fleamont flipped out the daily prophet and settled down to it. Sirius rose an eyebrow at his friend across the table.

"What?" James whispered.

Sirius shrugged.

"Don't think I didn't see that little smile." He whispered back. "Proud of that little number are you? You thinking you wanted to be a prefect after all?"

James scoffed, shaking his head.

"No way man. Just..." James may have gone on to explain himself, but at that moment Fleamont put down his paper and said:

"Oh yes son, Mr. Snape will pop in on Friday morning to deliver your potions. We planned on going down to Broadsands that day, so I invited him along."

He said it with a smile on a face, but the temperature around the table instantly dropped. Sirius had thinned out his lips in such an obvious attempt to keep his mouth shut that James almost actually applauded him. He himself could feel his ears heating up – after the last time he had seen Snape, he hadn't been looking forward to their Friday meeting at all.

"But... but he said no. Right?" He asked. Fleamont turned the page of his newspaper.

"Oh no, he said he'd come. Isn't that nice?" He responded, not even looking up from the Prophet to see the reaction of the boys he was talking to. "It will be good to be able to get to know the man who saved my boys life."

In that moment, James wished the ground would just open up and swallow him.

"Yeah." Said Sirius in a flakily sweet voice. "Prongs, can I have a word?"

The two boys made their way out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Another bed had been erected in James' room for Sirius, and these too were covered in Christmas lights. The mirror on the wall, which was charmed to give opinions on the person looking in it, was merrily humming 'jingle bells' to itself.

"Snivellus is coming here?" Sirius questioned the moment the door was closed. James plumped himself down on his bed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well I still need the Elixir over Christmas." He explained. Sirius pushed a hand through his hair, which was getting a bit long.

"But now he's coming on the traditional Broadsands trip?" He queried.

"I didn't invite him." James replied. "But it won't be so bad. Severus... I'm sure he wouldn't provoke you in front of my parents."

Sirius fell down on his own bed, putting his arms behind his head and staring up at the ceiling.

"His breathing provokes me." He mumbled, and James pretended not to hear.

All things considered, James awoke Friday morning feeling relatively confident about the day ahead. He'd managed to convince himself that so long as he stuck close to his parents then Severus wouldn't mention anything about the kiss or James' confessions of attraction the next morning. He didn't put it past the Slytherin to go ahead and tell Sirius of James crushing, but so long as they all stuck together as one big group no secrets should be revealed.

He dressed a little more carefully that day, opting for the black jeans at the bottom of his dresser that were maybe a bit too tight in certain areas, and basically had to be worn commando, and a dressy red shirt that he wouldn't usually wear for every day. He spent a long time twisting gel into his hair to get it looking neat but not like he was trying too hard. He was still there when Sirius woke up and quickly changed into the first clothes he found (including yesterday's socks).

"Trying to look good for your boyfriend?" He asked, his voice sounded jovial and teasing, but a quick glance over his shoulder showed James the boy's stormy face.

"He's not my boyfriend." The Quidditch player responded, sounding much more confident than he felt. He gave his hair one last tousle – earning him a wolf-whistle from the mirror, grabbed his rucksack, and followed Sirius down to the kitchen. When he arrived it was to see his parents sitting at the table, cups of tea in hand, chatting amicably to Severus Snape.

His mother laughed loudly at something Severus said, and didn't even notice her two Gryffindor boys enter the kitchen. Severus shot James his traditional smirk. James took in his threadbare green jumper, and cargo trousers, and tried to stop himself becoming unnaturally bashful at the sight.

"Good morning." He said, and James bit down unwanted thoughts of waking up every day to Severus telling him it was a good morning with a cup of tea in his hands. Euphemia jumped up from the table.

"Finally, you two!" She scolded. "I was about to run up and get you, we'll have to leave almost right away now. No tea for the two of you."

James checked the clock on the kitchen wall, which only had one hand, and three options: Early, On Time, and Late. Today it was merrily hanging about the 'Late' option.

They packed themselves into Euphemia's car, James getting squished on the back seat between Sirius and Severus. Sirius was resolutely staring out his window, mumbling to himself about traditions being soured. James couldn't really concentrate on it though, because Severus' leg was firmly pressed against his, and it was distracting as hell.

"Here, drink this." Severus said, his breath ghosting against James' ear and sending shivers right through his body. He took the pain-killing potion thankfully, gulping it down in two, and gave the glass back. It shrank in Severus' hand and he put it back into his satchel. James felt the heat that had been running through his veins recede back into him, and he let out a little sigh of content before he could stop himself. Snape gave him his trademark sexy smirk, and knowing look and the Quidditch player had to avert his eyes. Sirius huffed indignantly and crossed his arms.

"So, Severus." Fleamont began. "How's my boy doing eh? He's secretive about his Flamouriadesis – I was hoping you could let him know that it's nothing to be ashamed of."

Severus turned his head towards the front of the car at being addressed.

"James' recovery is going well, Mr. Potter." He stated, "He's managed to maintain his social

relationships despite the anger issues Cinis can cause, he's keeping up in class and although I'm still monitoring his weight I'm glad to see he's started eating again."

A chilly silence filled the car, in which James' eyes grew wide and Sirius' head whipped round to look at Snape for the first time that day. Eventually, Euphemia gave a shaky response.

"I see." She said, her hands firmly on the wheel of the car and her eyes peeled on the road. "Well, that's certainly good news. I think... I think we'll discuss that further later... as a family."

James could feel his heart beating wildly in his chest. He could feel Sirius' eyes boring into the side of his head, and the cogs in his parents' minds working overtime trying to process the information Severus had just told them. The rest of the car journey passed in silence, and when they eventually reached Broadsands, Sirius quickly dragged James off to a nearby cave for them to change and talk away from the Potters and Snape.

"You've not been eating?" The Black boy questioned the moment they were in the cave, pulling off his t-shirt. James shrugged his shoulders, looking down at the ground.

"It's not been easy to." He replied, voice small. "I just chucked up what I did eat for a little while. Severus... he had to teach me how to eat again, he's been encouraging me."

Sirius pulled off his trousers and pants, turning away from James as he did so, and quickly pulled on his swimming shorts.

"But why didn't you just tell us?" He asked. James could tell he'd calmed down a bit and wasn't as angry as before. The Quidditch player pulled his own jeans off just as Sirius turned back around. "Oh Merlin's beard – you're commando? What the hell were you expecting to happen today?"

James quickly pulled on his own swimming shorts, feeling his face heating up. He decided the best course of action would be to steadfastly ignore the question completely.

"I was embarrassed. About the eating thing. I know it's stupid but it just felt like Cinis was taking over my life, and I hated it."

James could feel Sirius' eyes raking over his still too-skinny body, and crossed his arms over his chest self-consciously. Eventually the eldest Black boy seemed to come to the conclusion that everything was fine, and yanked James by his arm back out on to the beach, as James himself hurried to put his clothes back into his rucksack.

The Potters and Snape were waiting for them by the water, Euphemia in a flowing kaftan and flowery swimming costume, Fleamont in his trunks, and Snape in surfer shorts. James let himself quickly check the boy out. There were goosebumps springing up over his pale arms. James himself was freezing, but it was a Potter family tradition to go swimming in Broadsands Bay over the Christmas break. The water was sub-zero and choppy, and you could only stay in for ten minutes top, but every year they drove out to take the plunge, and he wouldn't change it for the world.

"You do realize this is certifiably insane, right?" Severus asked the Quidditch player as he got within earshot. James shrugged his shoulders and gave him a weak smile. He joined hands with Sirius, and held out his other hand for Severus to take. The Slytherin stared at it questioningly, and then Euphemia took up his other hand.

"If you're going to be here, you have to participate." James explained, nodding down at his hand. Severus sent him a teasing look before twisting his fingers through James' – sending a spark of electricity through the Gryffindor. Then they were being dragged along by the group, and they ran

over the edge of the cliff, and into the sea.

X

"FUCK!"

Was the first thing James heard as his head broke the surface, and he swept his hair out of his eyes in time to see Severus doing the same thing, treading water and wiping it away from his eyes. The cold was so piercing that for a moment James could not remember ever being warm in his entire life, and the water was battering him about from side to side with so much force he worried for a moment he wouldn't find his feet, and would be swept out to sea – but then he felt a hand grope for his under water, and pushed his palm towards the source of warmth.

Severus pulled him towards him, and the two boys huddled in the water for some semblance of heat. A moment passed, then Severus burst out laughing.

"Mad." He said. "You're all completely mad."

It took a moment, but James felt himself begin to laugh too. Sirius, Euphemia and Fleamont had resurfaced to one side of them, but all James could focus on was Severus Snape, laughing and treading water in Broomsands Bay, their fingers entwined beneath the waves.

They were buffeted along the cliffs edge, and James felt himself being pulled more forcefully as Severus propelled them further down the tide and into a small alcove. James was shivering badly, and although the Slytherin he was with was still grinning maniacally in the aftermath of what they had just done, James knew that Severus could tell he was suffering from the extreme of temperatures more than usual. He found them washed up in a cave in the cliff's face – and Severus pulled him from the water unceremoniously, until they were stood in their swimwear.

James was suddenly aware that they were very much alone.

His parents and Sirius were still out in the ocean and here they were; shivering in the cold, and staring at each other in the dim light of the cave. He took a deep breath, and allowed himself, for a precious moment, to rake his eyes over the form of his partner. He took in the other boy's tall, angular body, his chin length black hair that was plastered to the sides of his head, and the water running over his shoulders. Just like in his dreams, Severus' collar-bone jutted out too much, and his pale skin seemed to stretch over his arms so that in the cold James could see the blue and green veins running up by the inside of his elbow. His eyes lowered to see a chicken-pox scar just below his ribs, and another, longer scar just before his hips. His iliac crest jumped out just like every other bone in his body, and there was a tempting trail of dark curly hair that started at his belly-button and disappeared behind the rim of his dark blue swim shorts. He finally let his breath out again when his eyes came to rest on their still entwined fingers.

"Like what you see?" Severus asked, voice low and husky, and James was almost instantly transported back to Severus' bathroom in his room in Hogwarts, where he had been asked the same question only a week prior. He flushed at being caught checking the other boy out, but nodded nonetheless – reminding himself he was not to lie. He swallowed heavily, and pointed to the long, thin scar above the Slytherin's hip.

"How did this happen?" He asked calmly, natural curiosity taking over any nerves he might have had. His finger, where he had been pointing, gently touched the skin there, and he felt Severus tense at the feeling – all the while aware their fingers were still entwined.

Severus coughed, and the jolt it sent through his body pulsed through James' fingertip.

"It is... an unpleasant story." The Slytherin eventually replied. He stepped forward, and their clasped hands meant James instinctively stepped backwards, pushing him up against a large rock in the cave. The Gryffindor could feel cold water lapping around his ankles, and the rough surface of the rock on his back, but all of it dulled because he could also feel Severus' breath on his cheek and the warmth of their palms rubbing together. "I have an order for you." Severus breathed.

James could only close his eyes and nod. Severus brought their clasped hands downwards, and pushed it roughly against James' swim shorts, so that it brushed uncomfortably close to his cock.

"I want you to touch yourself."

The Cave

James stood in that little cave, painfully aware that he could hear his parents and Sirius splashing about outside, just a little way off, frozen in shock. He hadn't heard right, surely? Or he was having another hormone-fuelled wet dream? Severus would never ask him – order him – to do something like that. He was already half-hard just at the thought of it, and as he felt Severus push once more with their clasped hands against him, he could feel his dick swelling against the back of his hand.

His knees went weak when he registered just how close the Slytherin's hand was to his cock, and he let out a puff of air that crystalized in front of him in the cold. Severus finally released his hand, but kept him effectively pinned against the rock behind him, and leant impossibly more forward to that his breath was ghosting across James' ear. The Gryffindor had never before thought of his ear as a sensitive spot, but all of a sudden he could not get enough of the feeling.

"Do I have to repeat myself?"

James quickly shook his head, maybe a little too enthusiastically, because Severus let out a low chuckle at the sight that had James aching with need. He seriously considered, for a moment, telling the boy to fuck off – that there was no way he would degrade himself in such a way for the Slytherins cheap thrills – but then he thought about the Elixir, and how Severus held it above him like a God, teasing monkeys with a banana and watching them dance, and he pushed his hands under his swimwear, and wrapped his hand around his dick.

A shudder ran through his body at the thought of Severus Snape watching him jack off, and with that image in his head, he closed his eyes and gave himself a few tentative tugs, leaning heavily against the rock behind him for support. He heard a low grumble, and then two, long-fingered hands were placed firmly on his too-skinny hips.

Embarrassingly, a little keen of appreciation fell from his lips at the contact, and his breath hitched when those hands travelled downwards and pried his dripping-wet swimwear from his hipbones, so that they fell down his legs and pooled at his ankles in the water; leaving him completely exposed and at the mercy of his Slytherin companion. He pulled at himself a little more erratically, all the while mortified to think he could feel his release already building up inside him.

He heard Severus give a short, appreciative hum, and let out a high-pitched gasp in response that he knew he would deny until the day he died.

"Turn around." Ordered Snape in the same low voice that would get James to do pretty much anything for him, and obediently, the Gryffindor rearranged himself so that he was facing the rock, leaning over a bit so he could put one hand on the rock to steady himself, whilst the other was still working feverishly on his cock. He felt his face heat up at the idea of Severus behind him, watching his behind clench and unclench again in his pleasure, but the boy didn't seem averse to it, if the re-emergence of his hands on James' side were anything to go by.

Those bony hands travelled up and down the Quidditch player's back, over his rounded behind and down the backs of his thighs, sending shockwaves of pleasure everywhere they touched and bringing James ever closer to the release his dick was looking for. He shuddered and gasped and squirmed under the attention, whilst simultaneously attempting to push himself backwards onto those hands for more.

"Spread your legs." Came Severus' rumbling command, and although every reasonable thought in James' mind told him he was giving the man far too much control, he felt himself obediently

pushing his legs further apart from each other – giving Severus an obscene view of his body. His hand was working overtime now, squeezing harshly at the base and twisting around the head as he working himself in a frenzy, and he knew he was probably less than a minute away from his release – he leant forward a little more, pushing his forehead against the rough texture of the rock and soaking up its coolness.

Only a few minutes ago he couldn't ever remember being warm – now he felt like he was on fire with need and lust, his whole body sending off waves of heat in his arousal.

Severus' fingers played confidently over his buttocks, and around the tops of his thighs, and James felt one cool digit slip dangerously close to the hole that had been presented so willingly to the boy, sending James well over the edge. He bucked forwards into his own hand, letting out a small grunt, and allowed himself to still as he felt warm, stickiness erupt over his fingers. Severus' hands instantly retracted from him, and he wasn't allowed to bask in his aftershocks for long. As he calmed down he felt his ears burn red from embarrassment, and he quickly collected himself together, bending down to wash his hand off in the sea and bring his shorts back up to give himself some form of cover.

When he had collected some form of confidence, straightened up and turned around, it was to see Severus leaning nonchalantly against the side of the cave, inspecting his nails. He felt bile rising in his throat at the sight, at how much this boy just didn't care. A flicker of white-hot rage curled in his stomach, and he was about to shout, but was once again reminded that Severus Snape was akin to a God to him, and he had no privilege to attack. He crossed his arms across his stomach self-consciously in an attempt to stem the waves of nausea and heat.

"I..." He started, shifting his weight from side to side and looking anywhere but at the other boy. When he could think of nothing to say, that would not come out accusatory and upset, he braved a glance in the Slytherin's direction. Severus sneered at him, crossing the cave in three short strides, and tilting James' head forcefully so that the Gryffindor had no choice but to maintain eye-contact.

"Save me your pretences Potter." He said, voice low, rumbling, the way James liked it – but not angry, despite the disgusted expression on his face. "Show me how angry you are. Show me how unfair you think it, that I took advantage of you."

James swallowed, ready to rise to the challenge, but scared of the consequences. He could feel a dull throbbing in his shorts from his release, and the pinpricks on his skin where Severus' fingers had ignited a spark in him. He lowered his gaze and shook his head.

Severus gripped a little tighter on his chin.

"Shout at me Potter. Get upset. You have every right." He muttered, but James just stood still, keeping his arms firmly crossed over his stomach. Eventually Severus pushed him backwards by his grip on his chin, sending him rocketing towards the floor. James landed with a splash in the water, and wiped a hand over his chin to try and dispel the feeling Severus had concocted there.

"I follow your orders." He said quietly. Severus shook his head, sneering, and turned himself away – looking directly at the large rock James had been leant against, which was now coated with his semen.

"You disgust me." He murmured quietly.

X

The ride back to Godric's Hollow was stonily silent. Sirius seemed to be attempting to stay as far

away from Severus, and thus James, as possible – which resulted to him pressing himself into the side of the car uncomfortably. Severus, on the other side, had forgone the pretence of comfortable bodily contact, and James was missing the gentle pressure of their legs pressed together that they had enjoyed on the ride up. In the front of the car James could see Euphemia sending him worried glances in the rear-view mirror, and Fleamont staring out the front with a confused look on his face.

When they eventually pulled up outside the little front garden of the cottage James found himself thanking his lucky stars he had been born a wizard and not a muggle, and thus only had to endure the long, boring car journeys on the odd occasion, and not every time he wished to travel. Sirius roughly pushed passed him and into the house, and Fleamont and Euphemia ushered him and Severus into the house, despite the Slytherins half-hearted attempts to protest that he really must go.

They sat at the old wooden table in the kitchen, where Severus had sat that morning having a cup of tea with his parents, and Euphemia almost instantly flicked her wand at the kettle so that it whistled in boiling and poured four cups of tea. Sirius had gone instantly upstairs, and his absence was noticeable. Fleamont sat down and surveyed the two boys in front of him. They had changed back into their day clothes, and the jeans James had felt so confident in that morning now felt uncomfortably tight.

"So," Fleamont began, "You've been having trouble with eating?"

James knew it was a sensitive subject for his parents. His father's sister in law, Dorea, had suffered from an eating disorder; it had broken down the marriage and she had been admitted to St. Mungo's for over a year in recovery. He shrugged his shoulders in a noncommittal way, lowering his eyes to avoid his father's gaze. Euphemia sat down beside her husband.

"You need to be honest with us Jamie."

James flushed at the nickname, and Severus made to stand.

"I should really leave you to discuss this." He excused, and went to turn from their presence, but Euphemia touched his arm lightly.

"Please stay. We would appreciate your support - as an expert." She asked, and reluctantly the Slytherin nodded his head, and sat back down.

They all looked to James, who ran a hand through his hair – the gel had washed out in the water, and it was curling with the salt in it. It felt horrible to the touch. He took a deep breath and began to speak.

"I'm able to eat more now. It's a struggle. It's not... I want to eat. Sometimes."

Severus sent him a brief, concerned look, then placed a hand on his shoulder which effectively shut him up. Fleamont turned his attention to the lanky haired boy.

"Is this usual behaviour for someone who has Flamouriadesis?"

Severus bit his lip.

"I have seen people have a loss of appetite with Cinis before, but I admit not to this extent. But your son does suffer far worse than anyone I have ever seen with the disease."

James crossed his arms over his stomach again, hunching his shoulders. He felt like he was being

called weak. Euphemia covered her mouth with her hand.

"Oh Jamie." She said behind it, closing her eyes. James felt shame flood his body.

"And is he getting better?" Fleamont asked Severus, and Severus slowly nodded.

"It is a difficult process. One that will take a lot of time and support." He responded. "Like all symptoms of the disease, he may never truly recover, but always need that extra support."

James felt a curl of heat rise in his stomach at the injustice. He hated being talked about like he was a dog that might have to be put down, and had to physically bite his lip to stop from showing his anger.

Fleamont frowned.

"And will you continue to provide that support?" He asked hesitantly. "He seems to trust you more than I would dare say he's ever trusted anyone." James blushed at his father's observation, but Severus allowed his eyes to rake lazily over the other teenager in the room, and nodded.

"I will." He said. "I will return next week with more Elixir." He added, as if going through his own plan. Euphemia nodded.

"I would ask you stay, help him through the next weeks, but I appreciate you must have your own family to see over the holidays. Christmas is such a lovely time of the year." She confessed. Severus tensed.

He looked around at the kitchen, covered in Christmas lights, bells, holly and fake snow. At the pots and pans lined up on the rack, and the smell of the casserole Euphemia had put in the slow cooker that morning, and the cup of tea on the table in front of him. He frowned.

"What is Christmas like?" He asked, before he could stop himself. All eyes in the room suddenly turned to him, and he lowered his eyes to the cup of tea in front of him and took a long sip.

"You... you've never celebrated Christmas?" Came a small voice from the hallway, and everyone redirected their attention to Sirius, who was stood there. Severus stood at the appearance of the Black heir.

"Forget I asked." He quickly said, snatching for his bag in an attempt to run, but Sirius was blocking his path through. Sirius shook his head, disbelievingly.

"No, I... hell, even my family celebrated Christmas." He admitted quietly. Then a determined expression fell onto his face and he stepped forwards. "Sit down Snape. Even you deserve to have a Christmas."

Severus fell heavily back on to his chair, an incredulous look on his face, staring at Sirius. James felt a small smile form on his lips at the sight. Sirius joined them at the table, and Euphemia rested a comforting hand on the Slytherin's arm.

"Do your family not celebrate the holidays?" She asked gently, and Severus shook his head.

"My father is... best not spoken of." He replied, scratching absently at his cheek. He kept his gaze focused intently on Euphemia's motherly form. She creased her brow at the confession.

"And your mother?" She asked hesitantly. Severus seemed to visibly tense at the question.

"She was... invariably busy. Now she... she is." He trained his eyes on the table, James noticed his hands balling around the hem of his jumper by his side. "My mother is dead."

Euphemia gasped, wrapping a protective arm around the boy. Fleamont sent James a look, as if questioning why their son had not warned them. James shrugged his shoulders in response – he had had no idea. Severus pried away from the motherly woman soon enough, and attempted something that was probably meant to be a smile but came out more like a grimace.

"I do not wish to intrude further-" He began, and attempted once more to stand from his seat, but Euphemia pushed him back down with a firm hand.

"Don't be ridiculous. You will be spending Christmas with us this year my dear. It is the least we can do. If your father has no protests."

Severus hastily assured her he wouldn't.

"Then I would like you to stay with us this holiday. If the boys don't mind I'm sure I can squeeze another bed in that room."

Severus looked a little shell-shocked. James bit his lip at the idea of Severus being there the whole break; after their interaction that afternoon, when the Slytherin had told James how disgusting he was, he hadn't expected the boy to want to stay for Christmas. His parents were extremely charitable, and worked on a more-the-merrier basis, so he wasn't surprised by the invitation – only the response.

A quick glance at Sirius' stony expression showed the other boy was trying very hard not to protest.

"I'm sure James wouldn't mind sharing his bed." He muttered under his breath, making the Quidditch player blush, and send his parents furtive glances to make sure they hadn't heard. Then Sirius gave Severus a long, considerate look and sighed audibly. "I don't mind sleeping on the sofa Euphemia." He said, more loudly, pointedly not looking at either Severus or James as he said it.

X

Later that night James was standing in the shower of the ensuite shower-room which was connected to the second bedroom of his parent's cottage.

Euphemia was in the kitchen, pottering over a hot stove, with Sirius entertaining her. James could hear his laugh all the way up the stairs. Fleamont had flued with Severus to his home to help him pack up some stuff for the holidays he would now be spending with the Potters.

The shower was warm and the water pressure constant and heavy, and he'd worked his toes into the rubbery bathmat beneath him so he didn't slip, with one hand on the bathroom tiles, and the other wrapped firmly around his dick. He tugged lazily at himself, breath coming out in little huffs, as he worked up the image in his head of what had happened in the cave at Broadsands Bay. The arousal was curling at the base of his stomach like a snake wrapping around its prey, and James thought the analogy to be quite poignant, given just who had been commanding him to touch himself in the cave. He got hard just thinking about it, how much he had been taken advantage of.

He tugged at himself slightly more erratically, imagining Severus behind him once more, his hands on his back, over the backs of his thighs, on his arse. His long fingers brushing over his –

He gasped, stilling his hand and gripping at the base of his cock to stop the flow, as his butt gave a spasm at the memory of just how close Severus had got to it. He didn't want to come just yet. He

didn't want to come thinking about it at all, but the images had come unbidden to his mind the moment he entered the water, and his hand had worked of its own accord to work him into a frenzy thinking about them.

In his memory, Severus told James to spread his legs, and he did it again now, pushing them apart so his ankles hit either side of the shower. He stilled his other hand as it twitched to reach behind him, to re-enact what Severus had done which had sent James over the edge, but he wasn't yet far gone enough to give into that urge. He picked up the pace of his tugging instead, his breaths coming out as pants now, punctuated by keens and moans of pleasure.

"Severus." He whispered, and then again, over and over – imagining the boys hands on his hips, over his cheeks, spreading them apart. "Oh Merlin, Severus!"

And then he was being forcibly turned around to see the cold black eyes of the real Severus Snape; fully clothed, in his shower. Before he could say anything to excuse what he had been doing, or even an indignant cry for the Slytherin to exit his private moment, Severus pulled him forwards by two large hands on his shoulders and crashed their lips together in a bruising kiss. James gasped and his mouth was invaded by his crush's tongue, and James realised his hand had never stopped working on his dick when all at once it was far too much and he had come, spurting sticky white semen for the second time that day, but this time all over his naked stomach, and over Severus' wet shirt.

"Fuck, Severus." James sputtered once he realised what had happened. "I am so sorry..."

The Slytherin surveyed him coolly, before exiting the shower without a word, leaving the boy feeling used and vulnerable.

Christmas

In the end Sirius didn't end up sleeping on the sofa. Fleamont pulled off some stunning wand-work and fit three beds snugly in the second bedroom of their little cottage. They couldn't open the wardrobe door the whole way, and James had to kneel on the third bed in the morning when he wanted to play with his hair and get it just right, but overall it worked for the short period of time that it had to. Severus was an incredibly attentive and gracious houseguest; always the first one up in the morning, and waiting in the kitchen with a freshly brewed pot of tea for when Euphemia and Fleamont awoke. He insisted on helping out around the house, and proved especially proficient at common household tasks. For the first time ever Euphemia came down in the morning to find a load of washing spinning itself into cleanliness, and it hadn't been her that had charmed it to.

Sirius and Severus had descended into a sort of quiet peace for the time being – both content to ignore each other's existence for as long as possible, and exchange precious few words when it looked like their outward silence to the other might prove offensive to James' parents.

A week and a half passed in relative calm, and soon Christmas was mere days away. James found himself in the doorway to his parent's room. Fleamont was out in the back garden with Sirius, showing him some duelling techniques. Severus had retired in the living room in a rare bout of contentedness, and was making an early start on their Christmas homework. James' own assignments were sat at the bottom of his trunk being ignored. Euphemia was sat at her vanity, hair cascading down around her shoulders, and powder brush in her hand, frowning at her reflection in the mirror. She spotted James hanging about her doorway by his reflection and plastered a smile on her face, turning to face her son.

"Everything okay my darling?" She asked, and James didn't miss her cast a curious glance over his now-slim figure. Meal times had become a particular bothersome, with everyone watching to make sure he actually swallowed his food, and Severus dividing his plate up into manageable portions, and he crossed an arm over his stomach at her gaze, feeling his ears heat up in embarrassment. He shrugged and invited himself in, sitting on the edge of her bed wearily.

"I don't know mum." He confessed. "I... I want to go shopping." He added, training his eyes on his socks. He missed Euphemia raise her eyebrow, but she smiled.

"Anything particular in mind Jamie?"

James shook his head, and then nodded it.

"I... I want to get Sev a present." He confessed. "For Christmas. Something nice."

Euphemia crossed the room and sat down next to her son.

"Something nice huh?" She asked. "So... You like him?"

James startled at the question, thinking she had caught on to his crush, but then calmed himself

when he realised she had said like, not love, and that she would have only meant as a friend.

"I... I owe him a lot."

"We all do. We all went shopping the other day and bought him a present – two in fact, one from us, and one from you. And now you want to buy him another." Euphemia explained. "Something nice. So, I guess you must really like him. You only got Sirius a book."

James frowned.

"It is a book on Quidditch, it's not like... boring."

Euphemia laughed.

"I know sweetie. I'm not saying you can't get him another present – in fact I think it's an excellent idea. But I want you to be honest with me." She continued. "We've always known you were a little... sensitive."

For the first time since entering her room, he looked up at her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He asked. Euphemia furrowed her brow.

"I hope I'm not overstepping a mark here Jamie, but..." She seemed to be collecting her thoughts, finding the best way to word her next sentence. "Well, I always thought that you and Sirius were awfully close."

James frowned. He and Sirius were...?

"Merlin mum!" He squawked. "Me and Sirius? Really?"

Euphemia just shrugged apologetically.

"Can you really blame me? But even so... I appreciate you and Sirius are not an item. But you and Severus?"

James paled at the thought that if this is how his mother thought, his dad probably felt something similar, and scratched at the back of his neck so he had an excuse not to look at her.

"I've never been interested in... in guys... before him. But we're not... He doesn't return my feelings."

"Are you sure?" Euphemia said, frowned. James nodded.

"I sort of confessed before the holidays began. He... he didn't react well."

Euphemia let out a little hum, and smiled at her son, before picking up some powder from the pot by the fireplace in her bedroom. She gave some to James too.

"I asked your father out three times." She confessed, "Eventually he agreed when I bought an early form of Sleekeazy from him at school and helped him make it better."

James, who had never heard this story before, felt himself grinning.

"Dad always said he never needed any help with potions." He muttered. The man had always made it quite clear he wasn't happy with James' grades in the subject, considering he was heir to his father's potions making company, and this was just the bit of information James needed to feel

better. Euphemia smirked knowingly.

"Of course he did, everyone needs a little help now and then." She spoke wisely. "Now, let's go shopping."

X

Diagon Alley was alive with the hustle and bustle of last minute Christmas shoppers. The day before Christmas Eve saw all the stores boasting later opening times and last minute sales, and the shoppers milled in and out at dangerously low speeds. Every now and again you would spot a harassed looking gent stumbling over his robes as he manoeuvred the crowds with large shopping bags slung over both arms, but for the most part it was 1 mile an hour to standstill human traffic.

James and Euphemia worked their way through the crowd and after some minutes of mindless wondering and pushing about, they found themselves on the other side of the street, in front of them was Obscurus Books; the publishers, to the left was Potage's Cauldron Shop, and to the right was Twilfitt and Tattings. These were only shops available without a crowd going to swallow them up, and Euphemia quickly grabbed her son's hand and dragged him into the clothing store.

Once inside, James frowned.

"This is a total girl's shop mum." He moaned. Euphemia just shrugged.

"Sorry Jamie, but it's this or cauldrons. That's what we get for leaving it until the day before Christmas Eve."

James took a brief look around the display cases of gold and silver jewellery, embezzled with expensive stones, and the rails of fur coats and satin dresses. He thought that Severus would probably prefer a new cauldron.

A chirpy shop assistant was suddenly in his face, she had long emerald robes and soft blonde hair, and James dimly registered that she was pretty.

"Looking for something special for someone special?" She asked, her voice high pitched and vaguely annoying.

James bit his lip, fully intent to turn her away, but his mother was there too.

"Yes he is." She replied for him. The shop assistant smiled warmly and pulled him towards the jewellery stand, pointing to this necklace and that ring. James shot his mother a look over his shoulder as the store-witch babbled on about silver broaches and ruby settings. He sighed.

"Look, my... someone special. They're not going to be interested in this." He tried to explain, but the witch just smiled more.

"That's okay – why don't you tell me about them? Maybe I can match something up with her personality."

James thought about it, how on earth did you begin to describe Severus Snape?

"They're... incredibly intelligent, but they hate charms - and flying – in fact, I'm pretty sure they're scared of heights. They're a great secret keeper, and..." He faltered for a moment, remembering all the things he felt fondly of about the Slytherin. "And he's always looking out for me. He's fiercely proud, a true Slytherin and he decorates everything in his house colours when he can." – he smiled – "He hates my friends; actually I'm pretty sure he hates me, but he's also working really hard to

make life better for me, even though he moans that his hair gets in his face when he has to work on the Elixir. I tell him to cut it but he's determined it looks better longer. I suppose he's probably right, but then he needs to stop moaning about." He caught himself ranting and quickly looked up – the shop assistant and his mother were both looking at him with a dreamy expression, and he felt himself heating up.

"I think I know just the thing." The shop assistant said, taking him once again by the hand further towards the back of the store. When she showed him the item, James instantly agreed it was the perfect gift.

X

Christmas Eve, and James found himself curled up on his bed, staring blankly at the tag on the neatly wrapped present in front of him. He had never spent so long trying to get a present just right, and was determined he wasn't going to ruin it by writing something stupid on the tag. Severus was downstairs in the kitchen with his father; James could hear their voices travelling up the stairs and through the open door to his room – they were animatedly discussing potions the way James had never been able to achieve with his father.

Sirius was also on his bed, alternating between stealing glances at his friend, and frowning at the parchment and quill in his hands. The two boys had been sat in silence for at least half an hour, both, apparently, at a loss for what to write. Sirius, it seemed, had decided to give up, because he stole one more glance at James and huffed.

"Why don't you just write 'I want to have your babies' and be done with it." He suggested, watching his friend turn scarlet at the thought. James was becoming more and more sensitive about the whole Snape issue – it was obvious to Sirius that he had long since progressed passed natural curiosity and had actually developed some skewed sense of affection for the Slytherin. Now James rolled his eyes, pointing to Sirius' own failed attempts at putting quill to parchment.

"And what are you writing?" He questioned, deflecting any response he may have had to provide Sirius with otherwise. The Black boy shrugged.

"A letter." He replied.

"To who?" Questioned James.

It appeared it was Sirius' turn to blush, looking down at the only words he had actually managed to write: 'Dear Lily'.

"To... a friend." He replied. James knew every friend he had, and would know right away something was up, but the Chaser decided not to question it, perhaps in a suggestion of mutual dropping the subject.

James finally put quill to the thick paper of the tag, and focused on using his best handwriting to write it out.

X

On Christmas morning all three boys that had been squished into the second bedroom of the Potter's home awoke early, due to the mirror merrily singing 'We wish you a merry Christmas' at the top of her lungs. They rose and dressed quietly, before heading down the stairs to the living room.

The living room itself was decked from head to toe in holly wreathes and bells, and the tall

Christmas tree they had erected a few days prior had been filled underneath with presents overnight. James' parents were sat on one of the two sofas cuddled together with warm glasses of mulled wine, and as the boys entered the room Euphemia rushed to provide them with the same beverage.

Severus looked at the glass in his hands, feeling the warmth of it against his palm, and took a deep breath of the sweet, spicy smell. Taking a tentative sip, he felt a comfortable warmth spread through his bones.

"This is Christmas." He whispered to himself, and even Sirius faltered in his hate for the Slytherin. The Gryffindor placed a hand on his shoulder gingerly, and steered him towards the other sofa, next to James.

"You two love birds sit together." He explained loudly, making Euphemia giggle, Fleamont frown and James shift uncomfortably. Severus was still staring at the glass of pure warmth in his hands in wonder. Sirius, taking his cues from Euphemia, began to fish out present after present from the tree, until everyone had a small pile in front of them.

"Ready?" Questioned Fleamont, and James fished the glass from Severus' hands, placing it delicately on a little table next to him. "Begin!"

There was a great frenzy as everyone attacked their gifts. That is, all except Severus – who carefully picked up one gift after another and unwrapped them with shaking hands. James, even in his own childish excitement over Christmas, could not help but spend his time watching the Slytherin handle each present as if it was a precious new born child. He first unwrapped the present from the Potters as a whole (a set full of potions supplies that made him smile warmly), then the present James had originally bought for him (a new book on werewolves), then the haphazardly wrapped gift Sirius had reluctantly put in for him (which turned out to be a rather nice set of brass scales), and finally came to pick up the extra gift James had bought in Twilfitt and Tattings.

James was painfully aware that he was holding his breath, and that across the room Euphemia and Sirius were also watching curiously.

Severus turned over the tag and read it carefully.

Severus – Thank you for everything.

He peeled back the spellotape and shook the contents out on to his hand. Out fell a small elasticated hairband, emerald green in colour, with a forest green and silver snake stitched into the pattern. As Severus watched, the little silver snake slithered around the twist of the band and flicked a little red tongue out and back in his mouth.

He looked up at James, and then around at the Potters and Sirius, before lowering his eyes to his lap again.

"I was not aware..." He began. "I did not get anything for you all."

Euphemia shook her head, crossing the room and sweeping the Slytherin up into a hug.

"That is not the point my boy." She said, gripping him tightly. "Merry Christmas Severus."

Severus brought his arms up and gently circled them around Euphemia in return.

"Merry Christmas."

The rest of the afternoon passed calmly and merrily, with bad cracker jokes, turkey and pigs in blankets. The boys retired late into the night having played tiddlywinks for hours in relative peace (except for that one time where Severus accidentally snapped Sirius' counter instead of his own and James thought they might accidentally start a war). The week between Christmas and New Year stretched lazily as snow swirled outside the windows and the fire was lit every day in the living room. The days passed with hot chocolate and Severus reminding James to do his potions homework, eventually, on the day of New Year's Eve, the Gryffindor sat down to do it.

He was curled up on the sofa, feet tucked under himself with his new Christmas socks on, which were a deep burgundy and very fluffy, and had stags on them that galloped around the hem – a gift from Sirius. His potions book was open in his lap, and some parchment and a quill was laid on top of it. He ran a hand through his already tousled hair, and sighed deeply at the few words he had actually managed to scribble at the top.

Severus was sat stiffly on the other side of the sofa, curling bay-leaves around cinnamon sticks and tying them with mandragora roots. He was piling them up in rows on the coffee table when he heard James huff angrily at his paper.

"Struggling?" He asked, glancing to the Gryffindor, who scratched behind his ears with both hands aggressively, before nodding. Severus shuffled further along the sofa so he could peer over James' knees at his paper. He rose a distinct eyebrow at the few words James had written.

"It just doesn't make sense." The Chaser complained quietly. "I don't see why I need to do potions anyway, I can't brew them anymore and I was never very good anyway."

James sent a quick look at his father as he said this, who was doing inventory checks for his potions making company, and felt the familiar swell of shame rise in him. Severus followed his gaze curiously.

"What is it you want to do with your life?" He asked. James bit his lip, shrugging his shoulders.

"I want... I want to play Quidditch." He admitted. "I know it's probably never going to happen – I mean every kid wants to play Quidditch professionally, and who says I'm better than anyone else? But... nothing else makes sense to me."

Severus nodded his head, then held out his hands for the paper. James sent him a questioning look, and the Slytherin rolled his eyes.

"You can drop potions next year. If you really want to chuck balls around for the rest of your life, then you have no reason to carry it on." He explained. "I see no point wasting my energy trying to get you to learn something you are only going to discontinue next year. I will... I will complete this essay for you."

James, stunned into uncharacteristic silence, carefully handed his essay over, along with his quill and ink pot.

"Th-thank you." He responded eventually, mouth going dry. Severus shook his head.

"I don't do anything for free. Instead of doing this you can sit there and write me a love letter." He mumbled in reply, a smirk falling on his lips, as he inched ever so closer to James so that Fleamont couldn't hear their whispered conversation. "I'll expect you to read it to me later so put some effort into it, hmm?" He added, placing a hand delicately on James' knee and making the Gryffindor jump. James could feel his mind racing at the order, but only nodded dumbly to the command, pulling another piece of parchment to him obediently.

James sat in his bedroom later that same day, his parents were downstairs entertaining the guests they had over to welcome in the New Year, and Sirius was circulating amongst them merrily. James knew he should be down there with them, but he was incredibly distracted by the task he had in his hands, and besides – Sirius was doing more than a good job making up for his absence. He himself had the same parchment from earlier sprawled out on his bed, and he was looking down at his own handwriting ruefully.

Severus stood in the doorway to his bedroom, and although the light from the hallway silhouetted his form, James knew from experience there would be a maddeningly attractive smirk on his face.

"Stand up and give us your rendition then." Severus commanded, and James immediately rose to his feet. He held out his letter in front of him, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks as he thought about what he was about to do.

"Severus." He mumbled quietly, very aware that the open door would mean his voice would travel downstairs. Severus nodded, sitting down on his bed to better survey the Gryffindor in front of him, enjoying watching him squirm before him.

"I... I didn't ask to be in this situation, and I never thought that I would be." James began, hands shaking as he began to read. "I want to be able to say that getting this disease – having Cinis – was the worst thing that ever happened to me, but the truth is I would be lying. The – the truth is... no matter how many times you order me about and try to embarrass me, or how many times you mess with my head... I'm always going to come crawling back for more.

"I know I deserve every punishment you dish out for me, and I can only hope that one day you might find it in you to forgive me, but until that day all I can do is strive to show you how much I've changed... how much you've changed me – for the better.

"I respect you. I am awed by your intelligence and skill, and admire your devotion to your projects. I... I selfishly like to think you think of me as a project, but would never presume to have any claim to your devotion. I never would have thought, four months ago, at the beginning of the school year, that I would find your jokes funny; that I would find your smile warm; or be excited to see your handwriting; or constantly want to be surrounded by that tone of voice you get when you're exasperated and trying not to show it."

James broke off, hands still shaking uncontrollably. For the first time he looked up from his letter and attempted to gauge a reaction from the boy on the bed. Severus was surveying him closely, showing no outward signs of emotion. James took a deep breath and carried on – this time he didn't need to look down at his parchment.

"Love is an incredibly strong word, but they say that love is a temporary madness, and in that sense I cannot deny that you drive me mad. I can no longer imagine life without you helping me to eat, or finishing my potions essays, or sending me off to do stupid tasks like this one; and that should make me mad – it should make me want to curse you for making me so dependent on you... but Merlin, Sev... I fucking love it."

He watched Severus carefully for a reaction, and the Slytherin slowly stood up, took two steps so he was directly in James' face, and placed a firm, chaste kiss to his lips.

He drew back slightly, holding James' head in place with a firm hand on the back of his neck. He searched James' eyes with deep, cold ones; and then looked away, at the mirror.

"You disgust me." He said quietly, before stealing from the room to join the hubbub of New Years Eve.

Conversation

Remus' parents' house was a neat, two-bed town-house in the middle of a busy village centre. It was painted a pastel blue on the outside, and James noted that the one next-door was a pastel pink, and then one next-door-but-one was a pastel yellow, so it occurred to him Lyall and Hope probably didn't pick the colour. There was no front garden, like his parents' cottage, but there was a little drive, where Hope's Mini was parked. He stood in front of the door with Sirius, both with backpacks on their shoulder – when their favourite werewolf opened the door.

"Hey! I thought you might not be coming, Pete got here hours ago!" The sandy-haired boy chided as he let them into the hallway.

It was somewhat of a tradition that each school holiday the Marauders had a one-night sleepover at Remus'. His parents had lamented that they couldn't have the boys to stay long-term over the holidays, as James so often did, but despite never outright saying it, all the boy's knew they couldn't afford the extra mouths to feed and as such never made comment. It was late afternoon by the time James and Sirius arrived on the doorstep, and while they would usually have wanted to come earlier, there had been the issue about what to do with Severus. James felt awkward leaving him in the company of his parents whilst they went off for a sleepover, especially with his mother's awareness of his crush on the Slytherin, but he knew it would not go over well if he invited Snape along. To be honest, he was somewhat glad of the excuse to get out from under the Slytherins' gaze. In the end they had left him discussing the right way to prepare various potions ingredients with Fleamont whilst Euphemia side-along apparated them to Remus. She had promised he would be well looked after, and then disappeared again.

"Sorry," James apologized as he toed off his shoes, and began to make his way up the stairs after Moony. "Christmas this year has been weird."

Sirius snorted his agreement as they made their way into the small first-story lounge. The house was set over three floors, with a kitchen and bathroom at the bottom, a living room and Remus' parents' bedroom on the middle floor and Remus' bedroom taking up the entirety of the top floor. It was a pain if you needed to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, but for the sake of getting four boys in the same room, the extra space was massively appreciated.

Pete was sat on one of the sofas as they entered the room and gave them a small wave.

"Prongs, Pads." He greeted.

The four boys comfortably sat themselves in the room, and after finding out that Lyall and Hope were out for the evening, settled in to some raucous fun. They sat in a circle and Pete pulled their currently incomplete map from his pocket. They had explored Hogwarts thoroughly with the use of the cloak, and more recently their animated forms – they knew of most of the secret passageways and tunnels, but they still had a lot of the grounds and Hogsmeade to flesh out. They animatedly discussed the map, its contents and how to improve it for a while, but James knew his heart wasn't truly in the subject. His mind kept straying back to the lanky-haired boy in his parents' cottage,

who might still be going over potions ingredients, or cooking dinner with his mum, or telling his parents all about his weekly battle with Cinis.

He spent the rest of the afternoon half-heartedly joining in with his friends, and when they retired up to the attic for some sleep when the clock had ticked into the next morning, he ended up lying awake, staring up at the eaves, thinking of the Slytherin who wasn't with them. Every time he managed to lull himself into a relaxed state, he was attacked by images of Broadsands Bay. Of Severus emerging from the waves and swearing, of his grin, of his warm hand beneath the water... of his hands on his behind, splaying his cheeks apart – getting dangerously close to his hole. The memories sent sparks of arousal straight down to his dick, which was steadily growing at the idea. He squirmed, trying to ignore the ache he was battling with to touch himself.

He'd never felt so taken advantage of as he had done in that cave, but he'd also never felt so turned on. Severus hadn't even touched him there, but he knew deep down that his own haphazard wanking had had little to do with his eventual release, but that one brush of the Slytherin's fingers over his sensitive pucker.

It clenched at the thought, sending a shockwave of pleasure through the Gryffindor, and making him groan despite himself. He stilled, however, when Pete rolled over at the noise. Remus' bed had been transfigured into a bunk bed, with Sirius taking the top-bunk, and he and Pete were on mattresses on the floor. Pete was too close for comfort if he was seriously thinking of getting himself off. He gulped, and quickly thought of all the things that turned him off to get himself back to normal, although he knew from experience that this wouldn't last for long.

He just... he wondered, what it would feel like. He had never thought himself as gay before he had developed his crush on Snape, and although he could admit that he had some form of feelings for his savior, he was struggling with defining the sexual arousal that came along with that. He felt of the boy as attractive, and he couldn't deny his commanding low voice sent pleasure cascading through him like no girl had ever done before – but he was at a loss as how to direct his sexual desires considering he had absolutely no idea on the fine logistics of gay sex.

Sure, he knew the basics, of who put what where and what not, but he would be lying if he said he understood how that could possibly be pleasurable, or how you could make it pleasurable. Except... when Severus had brushed against his hole in the cave... it had been pleasurable.

He blew out a puff of air, made sure his dick was fully flaccid, because he really didn't want any weird misunderstandings happening, and deftly stood, snatching up his wand from the floor beside him, and crossing the room to snuggle into bed with Remus. The werewolf grunted himself awake, glaring at James.

"Not that I'm not flattered, but I'm kind of interested in someone else." He muttered. James snorted and put up a silencing charm around the sandy-haired boy's four-poster.

"Someone I know?" He asked once it was complete. Remus rubbed his eyes and sat up slightly to survey his friend better. The sandy-haired boy bit his lip thoughtfully, having taken note of the silencing charms around his bed, and glanced upwards at where Sirius was fast asleep above them. If any of the marauders found out about his crush on the younger Black sibling, it would undoubtedly get back to Sirius – and that would be a disaster.

"Yes." He eventually admitted. "But nothing will ever happen between them and me."

James frowned, noting the glance up at Sirius' sleeping form. He'd thought the werewolf had found Sirius attractive for a while now, but had always assumed it stopped at attraction.

"I see." He mumbled. Remus twitched his lips into a half-smile.

"So there was a reason you're sneaking into bed with me?" He asked. His nose twitched, sniffing the air, making James feel self-conscious as to whether he had thoroughly cleaned his teeth the night before. Remus' sense of smell had always been impressive.

"Well, I'm not here to put the moves on you." He reassured the werewolf. "I'm here because I need advice."

Remus hummed.

"And it couldn't wait until morning?"

"I need... private advice. During the day there's always someone around."

Remus nodded his head, snuggling down again to get comfortable. He shifted slightly so that James could get more comfortable on the bed as well.

"So what is it Prongs?"

James steeled his courage, if there was anyone he could trust to answer his questions without laughing in his face, it was Remus Lupin – but it was still difficult to get the words out.

"How... how does it..." He puffed out a big breath of air. "I mean; how does it feel when... when someone's... you know..."

Remus blinked some more sleep-dust out of his eyes.

"I'm going to need more than that." He admitted, and James nodded, glad for the dark covering up his uncharacteristic blush.

"What I'm trying to say is... how does it feel when someone's... doing... you? How is it supposed to feel?"

There was a big intake of breath from Remus, but not an outward one. James was beginning to get paranoid when Remus finally spoke – voice slightly rigid.

"James... has Snape asked you to do something you're not comfortable with?"

James almost buried his head into the pillow out of embarrassment, but shook his head, even though technically it was a lie.

"I, um... I'm just curious."

Remus sat up in bed upright, so James followed suit. The werewolf looked at him for a long while.

"And were specifically talking about when someone else is pleasuring you?" He confirmed. James nodded, even though he cringed slightly at the word 'pleasuring'. Remus coughed into his hand delicately, which looked odd coming from someone who turned into a blood-thirsty, testosterone-fueled, raging beast once a month. The sandy-haired boy frowned at the Chaser in his bed. "What makes you think I know what that feels like?" He asked. James rose an eyebrow skeptically.

"Because I've shared a dorm with you for five years and no matter how many primal instincts you have to claim people as your own, nobody will ever be able to top Andrew Fortescue." He replied.

Remus grunted at the name of his summer fling. Andrew Fortescue was a body-building seventh

year from Ravenclaw that Remus had spent a lot of time with in his fourth year under the excuse of 'studying', and they had indulged in a brief romance over the summer holidays, but broken it off before the return to school because Remus hadn't been ready to come out of the closet and Andrew hadn't been willing to keep their relationship a secret. James had been on the receiving end of Remus' owls over the summer, so of course knew all about their tryst.

"Fine. There are lots of things a guy can do to pleasure you James – what are most curious about?"

James flushed, thinking about what had got him curious – and remembering Severus' fingers brushing against his hole. His dick throbbed at the memory, causing him to shuffle awkwardly in his position. Remus coughed uncomfortably, taking in deep breaths through his nose, and then puffing them out through his mouth. The sandy-haired boy gulped and started studying the curtains that were drawn around his bed, which James thought would be odd behavior – except the subject matter was awkward.

"I guess... about..." James buried his head in his hands. "A – Anal."

Remus pursed his lips at the confession, but chose to keep quiet about James' sudden curiosity.

"Well... if it's done right it feels incredibly good. Like you're... full."

James grimaced at the word, making Remus huff and cross his arms.

"Okay, I'm sorry. Go on." The boy apologized quickly, holding out his hands in a peace gesture. Remus rolled his eyes, but continued.

"So, it feels full – sometimes overwhelmingly so. If he's big you might think it's too much. Lube is incredibly important, but so is angles – if he hits the right spot then you'll be seeing stars."

James furrowed his brow.

"Like a g-spot for guys?"

Remus smirked.

"Kinda, yeah – he'll have to go fairly deep to find it though." James' dick gave another throb at the word 'deep', his mouth went dry at the thought. Remus rubbed at the back of his neck uneasily. James' tongue darted out to wet his lips, and Remus followed its movement. He swallowed before speaking again. "So... uh, does that about cover your curiosity?" He asked. James nodded, trying to will his blush to go down.

"Thanks." He squeaked. "Just one more thing?"

Remus shook his head – he took a deep breath and held the bridge of his nose like he had a headache.

"I can smell your arousal James, and I swear if you don't leave this bed soon I can't be held accountable for what happens next."

James frowned.

"I've been aroused by people around you before." He muttered. Remus snorted, and James saw his hand twitch like it was taking a lot of effort to hold himself back.

"Not like this – with the subject matter I'm not entirely surprised, but I don't generally have to deal

with it..." The werewolf mumbled, looking anywhere but at James. "Fuck Prongs you smell like a bitch in heat, begging to get fucked."

James spluttered at the words, quickly standing from the bed. Remus muttered an apology, but James knew it must be hard for a guy who had the instincts of an animal not to jump every sweet-smelling person he met. He risked patting the boy on the shoulder before returning to his mattress and putting up some warding spells in an attempt to dull whatever pheromones he was giving off.

Once he was nestled back in the confines of his own bed he made quick work of getting rid of his pajamas, and then rested a hand over his twinging cock. He hesitated for a moment, but then let his hand travel down towards his balls, and then, stretching his arm out ever so slightly further, until it was hovering over his hole.

He puffed out a big breath of air, thinking about the electric feeling he'd felt when Severus' fingers had brushed over it in the cave. Remus had said he smelt like he was begging to be fucked. Was he really that obvious? Was he so pathetic that he smelt like he needed a good buggering?

He snatched his hand back up to his chest, huffing at the canopy of his four-poster.

He wasn't going to do that – not yet.

Sexuality

Hogwarts was still covered in snow when the students came back off their break, sprinkled here and there with the footprints of the few students that had stayed behind to enjoy the holidays in the castle. Remus sat in the library, flicking through the pages of his Runes book, and not paying attention in the slightest to the wriggles and lines that supposedly made up complex symbols. His head was swimming, and he knew exactly the reason why. Across from him, knees drawn up to his chest, and nose buried in a Herbology volume, sat Regulus Black.

They'd been sat in silence for twenty minutes, and it was not comfortable.

The werewolf grimaced into his own heavy tomb, and scratched behind his ear with one hand in an aggravated way. He glanced once more at the young teenager on the other side of the dark-wood desk. It was the day before term officially began, and he was dressed in a dark grey turtle neck jumper and black, formal trousers; his dark hair flicking and curling around his ears and down to the nape of his neck in thick locks that begged for Remus to reach out and run his fingers through them. The boy was pouting – pouting – at his book.

"How was your break?" Remus asked, cursing himself as his voice came out a lot higher pitched than was strictly necessary. Regulus glanced up at the sound of his voice, and Remus was struck by just how stormy his eyes were. He watched as Regulus' brow creased and he glanced back down towards the Herbology book in his lap.

"Adequate." He replied, flipping one of the pages and going back to reading. Remus felt his cheeks heat up at the short response, and thought back to the days before the break, when they had chatted amicably in each other's company. Had something happened over the holidays to make the young Slytherin angry at him?

He took a deep breath and tried again.

"Did you get many presents?" He asked. "Was it nice to see your parents?"

Regulus sent him another look, this time it looked like a glare.

"I stayed at school." He supplied, then returned his attention to the book. Remus frowned at the response – it was very rare for anyone to stay at the castle over Christmas, most people had a family to get back to, and Regulus most definitely did – it was strange he would choose to stay at Hogwarts.

He pushed a little further.

"Did any of your friends stay too?"

Regulus snapped his book closed and slammed it down on the table, resulting in a bang that made Madam Pince look their way and press a finger to her lips. Remus winced at the sound, and the resulting stony glare that Regulus was sending him.

"Why do you care Lupin?" He growled. "What is your interest in me and my life?" He added, when Remus didn't respond. The werewolf bit his lip.

"I... I just thought we were... friends. Maybe."

Regulus rolled his eyes.

"And why in Merlin's name would you think that?" He mumbled.

Remus closed his book too. He shifted his weight on his chair, avoiding eye-contact with the boy he had developed a stupid little crush on. He coughed.

"I... enjoy your company. I had hoped you... returned that feeling."

Regulus snorted, a sneer amongst his features that marred his natural good-looks. He crossed his arms across his chest and looked at a spot just over Remus' shoulder.

"Is my brother not enough for you anymore?" He asked, angrily. "You already have the good brother as a friend, I see no reason you would want the Slytherin one."

Remus shot his eyes back to Regulus' stormy ones, but Regulus was staring down at his lap. The werewolf opened his mouth to protest that Regulus' house, or Remus' relationship with Sirius had very little to do with his feelings for the younger sibling, but Regulus pushed himself away from the desk and stormed out of the library – leaving Remus alone with his thoughts.

X

Sirius lay in his bed, back at Hogwarts, contemplating Lily Evans.

The girl really was a sight to behold, with long fiery hair and a dusting of light freckles across her nose. James had always raved about her eyes, and when Sirius thought about it, they really were the most dazzling shade of green. He'd never met someone who held themselves with such grace and charm, and with her long, shapely legs and slim, feminine shoulders – she just managed to pull off everything she did. Sirius could see why James would have a crush on her.

He pulled out the letter he had been writing to her over the Christmas break guiltily. He had never got around to sending it, but he had eventually put words to paper. Meaningless words, about how his Christmas was going, about how he wished her Christmas was going, about her sister, his brother, everything they had connected on over the last couple of months. He'd signed off with a truthful confession of missing her over the break, and resolved never to send it, because when James finally came to his senses over this whole Snape thing, he'd be wanting to go right back to the beauty that was Lily Evans.

It didn't stop him from feeling guilty about never sending it though.

Severus Snape, on the other hand, was the opposite of Lily. He was too tall, too lanky and too Slytherin. He always walked with a hunch to his already rounded shoulders, and always had a horrible sneer on his hooked-nosed face. His hair was generally greasy, his skin too pale, and his morals too dark. There were no redeeming factors about the boy – and yet somehow James had gone and got himself feelings for the dungeon bat.

It had been so pathetically clear over the break, how James had mooned over the Slytherin, had spent hours wrapping him a special present and detailing out the tag. How he'd pussy-footed around the boy, making sure he was completely comfortable at all times. Sirius hated to think that James had been struggling with not being able to eat and the marauders hadn't even known – that

he'd been depending on Snape for help, when he could have been leaning on the marauders instead.

The boy had been distancing himself, and it had made Sirius feel... lonely.

It didn't help that his own brother had barely spoken a word to him since term had begun. Regulus was steadfastly ignoring him with every chance he got, and every time he thought that they might be about to find a solution to whatever had been bothering his brother, something came up which put them right back to square one. He and Regulus had always been close, and yet since the summer it felt like they couldn't have been further apart. Sirius had his suspicions that it had had something to do with his early departure to the Potters that summer, but Regulus knew how their parents were – he was aware of how Sirius felt about it all.

Pete had been distant too, Sirius mused. He was always out and about under the excuse of tutoring, and even when he was with the marauders his mind seemed to be elsewhere. And Remus... the boy was busy with OWLS, and his prefect duties, and had briefly mentioned some boy troubles before the break had begun.

It wasn't an uncommon sight to find Sirius alone in the dormitory any more.

Which sucked.

He shifted slightly on his bed, crossing his arms behind his head and staring morosely at the ceiling, pondering his friends. Remus had boy troubles, James had... boy troubles; what was so exciting about the male form that had captured two of his friends? He frowned at his canopy of his four-poster; it wasn't that he meant to be prejudice – Remus and James could fuck whoever they wanted – but he'd been bought up in a household that was entirely different to theirs. His mother had been a big advocate for the abolition of anything that did not directly further their pure-blood family tree, and there was no point shagging guys when they couldn't give you heirs.

But... he was no longer the heir to the Black name, so Regulus could deal with that whole affair.

His brow creased further as he tried to get more into the psyche of his friends. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine. One of his favourite kinks was taking showers together with his partners, and so he rearranged the image of the faceless blonde in his fantasies, and let it change into Snape. He quickly opened his eyes and gagged at the visual of pale, swallow skin and a disfigured member.

He sighed and tried again, deciding that James was definitely strange for picking Snivellus as the object of his desires, but that didn't mean that all men were disgusting. Closing his eyes once more, he pictured James instead. He'd seen the boy naked many times before – it was an occupational hazard when they all shared a dormitory – but he focused on the last time he'd caught a glimpse of the Chaser in the nude – pulling down his tight jeans to reveal he'd gone commando, so that he could change into his swimwear in Broadsands Bay.

James was skinnier than Sirius had ever noticed, his tanned skin running over his bones so that Sirius could count each rib as he breathed in. A quick look down showed a round buttocks and limp dick.

Sirius quickly opened his eyes, but didn't feel disgusted, just shocked at his own imagination. He breathed slowly as he let his hand travel low, pushing his loose pajama bottoms passed his hips, and began to stroke himself into firmness. He decided not to go with James, it was too odd to think of the boy that way, but instead focused his efforts on Remus.

Remus was the only boy in their dorm who was open about his sexuality – if not to the rest of the

school, definitely to the marauders – and Sirius couldn't deny he was the most toned of the four of them. He let his imagination reaffirm his thoughts, thinking about his chest muscles, and his thigh muscles – all firm from their monthly work out when he transformed into a werewolf. He thought about sandy hair, and warm brown eyes looking at him as they stepped into the shower in his mind, and felt a spark of arousal.

He tugged at himself a little faster, thinking about Remus' muscles flexing as he wrapped his arms around Sirius, and his rough, large hands on his back, and fluttering over the tops of his thighs. He imagined the boy kissing him, on his neck, his jawline, his lips, and imagined his own fingers and lips exploring the body before him. In his day-dream, the werewolf pulled them flush, using his teeth to gaze Sirius' skin, and pressed their erections together, making friction that Sirius was so desperately trying to simulate with his hand. His other hand fluttered down over his stomach, and came to rest over his balls, tugging at them and rolling them between his fingers, making him pant jaggedly at the feeling.

Then it was all over as quickly as it had begun, as the person in his imagination came crashing through the door, and he was forced to pull his hands away and pull his covers up around him.

He coughed embarrassedly as Remus stopped in his tracks to look at the sight he must be – flushed, breathing heavily, with his covers pulled up around chest in haste. The Werewolf averted his gaze diplomatically, allowing Sirius enough privacy to pull his pajama bottoms back up around his now fully firm dick. He sat up in bed, determined to keep his composure and look the boy in the eye.

Remus chuckled, and took a swig from a bottle he had in his hand. Sirius read the label to find it to be fire-whisky.

"You've been drinking?" He asked, with a frown on his face. It was the night before term began, what would have made Remus forgo his usual worrying over their OWLS and pick up a bottle?

Remus shrugged.

"That cute chick from Huff-Hufflepuff gave me some." He murmured, sitting down heavily on his bed, and hiccupping. Sirius rolled his eyes – the boy was fearsome in many ways, but he was a total light-weight when it came to drinking.

"That cute chick?" He questioned, because Remus wasn't exactly one for, well, chicks.

"You know the one... Samwell?" Remus replied, frowning at his own inability to remember. Samwell made the most sense, they'd done a lot of kissing and Remus didn't exactly see himself snogging a girl.

"Samantha?" Asked Sirius.

"Bingo!" Exclaimed the werewolf.

Wait... that would mean he had made out with a girl.

"She's not a very good kisser." Remus said, scrunching up his nose at the idea that he had kissed her at all – maybe it was best he put the alcohol away.

Sirius rose an eyebrow at the confession.

"Isn't Samantha the one that's been flirting with you for like a year and a half now? The one you said that even if you were straight you wouldn't go there?" He questioned, a flicker of anger running through him. So he was sat alone in the dorm, feeling lonely, whilst Remus got his rocks

off with some S.T.I ridden chick who didn't even realize the guy was a thorough-bred cock-sucker?

He came and sat down on the other boy's bed, ignoring the obvious tent in his trousers where his body had yet to catch up with his mind. Remus sent him a warm, toothy grin.

"Jealous Pads?" He asked, making Sirius colour slightly. "Don't worry. I didn't sleep with her."

Sirius breathed a sigh of relief without realizing it, and even though Remus was intoxicated, he still noticed it.

"... You know I'm not into girls." He muttered. Sirius nodded.

"I know." He replied, worrying his lower lip between his teeth. "I just... You know what your like with drink – I worry about you making bad judgements."

Remus looked at him for long moment, narrowing his eyes as he surveyed the other boy on his bed.

"I want to sleep with you." He said, uncharacteristically confident. Sirius' eyes widened, and he swallowed heavily. He watched as Remus leant forwards, placing a hand firmly on Sirius' knee. Sirius felt his breathing shallow, and the tent in his trousers, which had been steadily going down, sprung back into life.

"You don't mean that." He replied, but even he knew there was no conviction in his tone. Remus just shrugged, travelling his hand up the boy's leg, and leaning in dangerously close to Sirius' ear.

"Don't I?" He whispered, and Sirius felt a shiver run through his body. He gently, tentatively, allowed his hands to travel up to his friend's shirt, and ball around it.

"I'm very confused." Sirius replied, eyes wide as he allowed Remus to get far too close to his face. Their lips brushed, sending a jolt of electricity through him.

"Just say the word and I'll stop." Said Remus. "But if you don't say so now I'm really not sure I can... stop."

Sirius allowed himself a precious moment to revel in Remus' hands under his baggy top, and Remus' breath over his ear, cheek and lips, and Remus leg pressed against his. He licked his lips, and then, although he would never admit it later – desperately pushed them against his friend's.

Remus almost instantly pushed him backwards, so that he landed roughly on his back against the bed. He let out a low, guttural moan as the werewolf invaded his mouth with a wet tongue, and pulled a knee up to cause a large amount of friction between their legs. Large hands were everywhere on his body, with calloused finger-tips fluttering over his hips. Their mouths dislodged from each other, and Remus instantly latched onto his neck, sucking a hot, wet mark there that Sirius knew he would have to use concealer charms for in the morning.

He gasped and writhed at the pleasure, as Remus' fingers went bellow his waistband and tangled themselves in the hair there. All items of clothing were quickly ridden of, thrown about the room haphazardly, and the two boys paused to look at each other. Remus was everything Sirius had thought about in his fantasy just twenty minutes before – except he smelt of alcohol and there was no shower.

The two boys dived right back in, hands everywhere, erections rubbing together as they thrustured into each other's company. Sirius gasped, letting out a little squeak as Remus' hand travelled low

and gripped at him firmly. He pumped the boy under him a few times, and Sirius arched up into him, desperate for more attention, whilst the werewolf bit and licked at his shoulders and neck attentively.

"Fuck. Rem-" He cried, but then tensed as he heard the boy on top mutter a spell he himself had used a few times with girls he'd bedded. A wet, sticky sensation erupted between his legs and he squirmed at the sensation – he'd never realized how uncomfortable that spell could actually be. "I... are we actually going to do this?"

Remus stilled in his ministrations.

"I planned to. You're... okay with that?"

Sirius thought about the stickiness down below, and the tantalizing fingers running around his body, and the firm grip around his dick. He didn't exactly revel in the idea of Remus being on top, but on reflection of the werewolf's experience in such regards, as opposed to his own, he relented.

Slowly, he nodded, and Remus gently pushed himself against the Black boy, breathing out heavily.

"I've wanted this for a long time." He muttered, and Sirius gripped on to his shoulders, as the boy rocked against his open legs, creating a friction that was all at once far too much and nowhere near enough. Hands travelled low, and all of a sudden all of the beautiful sensations running around his body were dulled as Sirius felt Remus push a finger inside him.

"Holy fuck." He gasped, instantly clenching around the foreign invader and pushing it out a little, goosebumps springing up over his arms and back – but Remus' other hand was gently wrapped around his aching hard dick, and his lips were placing light kisses all over his chest, and he could feel himself beginning to relax.

Remus worked meticulously, for what seemed like hours, spreading the boy underneath him until Sirius was pushing back on to his fingers, reluctant to say it out loud but desperate for that little bit more. Remus' hands were playing him like a piano, and Sirius, for a long time, had been at a loss as to where to put his own – eventually settling for placing them down on the werewolf's shoulders and tracing circles there when he had enough mental capacity to focus on it.

Eventually, Remus pulled his fingers out, locking eye-contact with the boy beneath him, and Sirius took a deep breath, attempting not to whimper at suddenly feeling very empty. Remus let out a huff of air over his companion's face, which should have been disgusting but just felt natural.

"This is your last chance Padfoot." The werewolf said, shifting slightly on top of the boy. "You just have to say."

Sirius gulped, thinking about how stretched he felt, about how every moment Remus' fingers had been in him he had felt strange and too exposed, but when they had disappeared he had almost instantly missed the feeling, and he shook his head.

Reaching up, he pressed his lips once more to Remus, pushing a hand into the sandy-haired boy's hair, and dragging him back down with him.

"I need this right now." He confessed. "Don't... don't go."

Remus nodded, pushing himself further against the boy's spread legs until he felt himself slip inside. Mindful of Sirius' gasps and hiccups of pleasure and uncomfortableness, he took it slowly, rocking back and forth gently into the boy – and latched his mouth back onto the boy's neck.

Bright light filtered into the corridor from the large windows, and there a few younger students were hurrying about, trying to find their friends from other houses for a night of getting into trouble before term began. James had seen Remus saunter off with a Hufflepuff girl, with a few sneakily hidden bottles of fire-whiskey hidden in their robes, and Pete herd a couple of Ravenclaw third years towards the potions classrooms for a catch-up lesson after the Christmas break. Sirius had excused himself pretty quickly from their group as soon as the Hogwarts Express had pulled into Hogsmeade station, with a confused and angry look towards the Chaser, and as far as James could tell had holed himself up in their dorm for the foreseeable future. James was walking down the corridor alone, his shoes clacking against the stone floor.

"James."

He slowed to a stop at the sound of his own name, said so delectably by such a familiar voice, and cursed himself for his cheeks heating up at the sound. He waited until the second years at the end of the corridor had turned the corner before turning around to face the man who had called him.

Severus. The man he'd been avoiding since New Year's Eve.

It hadn't exactly been an easy feat to avoid and ignore the boy, considering they had shared a bedroom for the remainder of the break, and every day Severus seemed to come up with an order that was more embarrassing and difficult than the last. He'd attempted to bury himself in his own homework in an attempt to not get distracted by the Slytherin, which James supposed was probably why Sirius was sending him worried looks. His only solace had been his brief visit to Remus' – where he had spent the entire time thinking of Severus in his parents' home.

He turned, and Severus was everything he knew he would be. Tall and lanky, dressed in dark clothing that hung off him in all the wrong places, hooked nose, pale skin, sunken, black eyes. But Merlin, he'd tied his hair back with the hairband James had given him for Christmas and his cheekbones were so high, and his jawline so tempting.

"Se-Severus." He responded, crossing one arm over his stomach and clutching at the elbow of his other arm. He searched for eye contact from his companion, and was shocked to find the Slytherin give it to him easily.

"You've been avoiding me." Severus stated. James went to shake his head, then remembered before the break, when Severus had told him quite clearly he was never to lie, and nodded instead.

"Yes." He supplied.

Severus took a few steps closer to him, and when he was sure there was no one around, traced the back of one of his fingers over James' cheek.

"You are quite pretty. You know that?" He stated, with more confidence than James would have thought him capable. The Chaser felt himself heat up at the idea of Severus thinking of him as pretty. But the Slytherin kept talking. "Objectively, of course. I am sure you are aware of the girls throwing themselves at your heels, and the heels of your marauder buddies."

The hand that had been on James cheek was snatched away again as a seventh year Slytherin turned the corner.

"I have a request." Severus stated, and James, who had been expecting him to say order, and was pleasantly surprised by the change of tone in his Slytherin's actions, nodded along earnestly. "Will

you come to my work room in an hour?"

Sleeping Lions

James knocked tentatively upon the door into Severus' workroom, and it quickly swung open. Severus grabbed his arm and yanked him inside unceremoniously, making the Chaser stumble into the boy who had grabbed him. He was caught and steadied, and when he finally regained his balance he looked up into Severus' dark eyes, and dared to think he might have found some worry there.

"Sit down on the sofa." Severus demanded, and James obediently went to the sofa and sat himself down. Severus threw a blanket over the middle cauldron, the one containing Wolfsbane, and came to sit down too.

James shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry I was avoiding you." He mumbled, having rehearsed it on the way down. He knew he was in for a punishment, but he wasn't sure how angry he had made the Slytherin in his attempts to ignore the boy.

Severus surveyed him with intense eyes.

"Why were you avoiding me?"

James looked down at his knees, knocking them together uncomfortably, and bit his lip. He wanted to lie; he wanted to say that he just didn't want to see his face – but he knew if he was caught lying he would not enjoy the repercussions, whatever they were.

"I... I was ashamed." He confessed. "Sometimes I think we're getting somewhere; that maybe I've managed to get you to like me a bit, but..."

He trailed off, but Severus coughed, raising a cool eyebrow.

"Continue." He ordered.

"You disgust me." James repeated the words that had been floating around in his head for days.

"You said that to me... Maybe I just didn't want to upset you further."

Severus frowned at him.

"James, I..." He began, but then changed his mind and changed tactics. "Maybe you didn't want to upset me further? Did you want to avoid upsetting me or not?" He asked, reveling when James crossed and uncrossed his legs uncomfortably.

"I didn't want to upset you further." He confessed, refusing to look up. Severus frowned further, letting out a hearty sigh.

"Look, James..." He started. "You don't disgust me."

James hesitantly looked up, biting his bottom lip.

"Then why would you say it?" He asked, running his hands up and down his thighs nervously.

Severus swallowed.

"It's actually the reason I called you here tonight." Severus confessed. "When I said those words, I was aiming them at myself."

James, daring not believe it, swallowed and let out a deep breath.

"Why?" He asked.

Severus coughed, crossing his arms.

"You have feelings for me, whether you are fully aware of them or not – your letter over the holidays proved that - and I do not return those feelings." He explained. James' brow creased at the words. It hurt to hear it, even though James was well aware of how much Severus did not return any feelings he may have towards the Slytherin, and he swallowed audibly. "That being said... I took advantage of you in that cave, and again on New Year's Eve. I... was disgusted in myself, because I should not have sunk to those levels."

James felt heat rise into his cheeks at the memory of Broadsands Bay, and the shower, and the kiss of New Year's Eve. His heart swelled at the realization that maybe Severus had not spent the holidays wishing to be somewhere else, and turned off by James.

"You..." He began, trying to find a way to word what he wanted to say. "You don't have to feel that way. I love – I mean... I kissed you before, without permission."

Severus stilled considerably.

"Yes. That probably should be addressed further." He replied. James paled at the idea. He leapt to his feet, but Severus was already in his face – breath folding over his face in hot waves that made the Chaser feel suddenly claustrophobic. "Not tonight, James... I am here trying to... reconcile. This is my... attempt at an apology."

James started, stilling his attempts to get away, as Severus put a firm, but gentle hand on his arm. He looked at the Slytherin distrustfully.

"You won't... you won't punish me?"

Severus shook his head, but a tick in his temple suggested just how hard he was trying to keep his cool.

"As long as you stick to the rules, you have nothing to fear." He replied, steering James back to the sofa, and this time sitting down beside him. James stayed uncomfortably rigid, but relaxed when the Slytherin took out his wand and rolled it along the floor, out of arms reach, with no word of making James do the same.

"So..." the Gryffindor started, unsure of himself and unwilling to push any boundaries. Severus grimaced, but did not say anything to discourage him. "You... you don't have to actually say sorry or anything, I get it..." James carried on.

"I had no real intention to. I just... You needed to understand that I was aware of how wrong my actions were." Replied Severus coldly.

James nodded in understanding, berating himself for foolishly thinking the Slytherin might swallow his pride and actually say the words 'I am sorry'.

"So why am I here?" The Gryffindor asked hesitantly.

Severus rose a practiced eyebrow, a teasing smirk on his thin lips.

"Reconciliation." He answered. "I have wronged you. You have feelings for me and thus I assumed you might wish to spend time with me, was my assumption incorrect?"

James hastily shook his head.

"Of course not."

Severus' teasing smirk grew, stirring a heat at the base of James' stomach that for once, had very little to do with Cinis.

"Then tonight I am yours." The Slytherin said, making James' heart skip a beat, then speed up considerably. "Tell me, James, all about why I should fall in love with you."

Once James got over the initial shock of the demand, he sank back into the sofa and relaxed a little. If there was one thing he knew it was how to get someone to fall for him, and although all previous experience had been with girls, it couldn't be too hard to sub-contract to the male variety. He began to talk, and found Severus responded good-naturedly and often humourously. They conversed easily, if not intimately, as the night passed. Before they knew it curfew had passed, and they had exhausted themselves talking. James felt his eyes falling closed, and the two of them fell into a contented sleep on the sofa.

- X -

Screwing up his eyes in concentration, Sirius Black let out a small moan and felt pinpricks of goosebumps running up his arms as his mind came back in to the land of the awake. There was warmth all over him from the sun streaming in through the curtains of his four-poster, and a heavy arm was slung over his waist. He could feel a hard, muscled body behind him; pressing into his back and, terrifyingly, a rock-hard cock pressed firmly against his bum.

He opened his eyes suddenly and blinked a lot against the light streaming in. He didn't dare move for waking the boy behind him, and cursed himself as the memories of last night caught up with him. He moved ever so slightly and winced as a pain shot through his lower back, and a dull throb erupted in his behind. He coloured at the idea.

He settled back in against the boy behind him, glancing down at the hairy arm around his middle, and swallowed. He reasoned with himself that Remus had been the one to suggest they slept together, and then frowned when he pondered whether Remus would expect them to be an item in the light of the morning. His skin crawled at the thought. He hadn't ever expected to spend a night in the company of a man, to do the things he had experienced the previous night, and if he was honest he didn't have any real wish to repeat them.

It wasn't that Remus was bad in bed – heck, the man worked methodically to ensure Sirius had a good time – but it had still been painful, and over an hour of pounding had meant that Sirius had begun to seriously suffer towards the end. It was to be expected – every time Sirius had a 'first time' with a new partner, it always took him longer to release; but it was never fun.

He let out an audible sigh, then tensed as Remus' arm lifted from around his middle and the other boy turned over in his sleep.

He gingerly extracted himself from the bed, and pulled on the first pair of comfortable trousers he could find. He dully noted they were Remus' sweatpants, and he had pulled them over his bare buttocks, but on reflection of exactly what they'd done the night before, the offence seemed negligible. Surveying the room, he found Pete curled up in bed in rat form, and paled as he realized the boy would have seen he and Remus sleeping naked in the same bed, and let out a huff of breath he hadn't realized he was holding when James' bed came up mercifully empty.

He crossed the thought from his mind that maybe James was waking up naked in a certain Slytherin's bed, and pulled on a school shirt and some heavy robes over his ensemble, stealing from the room quietly.

He tucked his feet into socks and shoes as he hopped down the staircase and arrived in Gryffindor common room the most disheveled he ever had. A seventh year girl sent him a leering look, which he pointedly ignored, and attempted to stop his head from spinning.

He wasn't gay.

He knew that for sure. Remus had been perfectly charming and if he was going to make a massive mistake and sleep with any of his friends, the werewolf had probably been the best choice, but Sirius just couldn't get over the unrelenting juts of his body, or the inevitable pulsing cock. Sure, he could objective state that Remus was a good-looking guy, but Sirius was not attracted to him or any other person with a blood-sword to stick up his ass. He reminded himself that experimentation was normal for a kid his age, and guys helped each other get off all the time – his reactions the night before were not proof of his poof-dom.

He glared at a group of excitable first years by the portrait and stalked his way out determinedly, ignoring the little voice in the back of his head that was attempting to remind him he looked like death itself and should not allow other people to see him as such.

He travelled down staircase after staircase, cursing himself for the cowboy walk he had adopted to stop the worst of the pangs at the base of his spine. Anyone who laid eyes on him would instantly know exactly what had been where the night before, but he instinctively limped to alleviate the pain. He stopped dead at the entrance to the grand hall, coming face to face to Lily Evans. It was the first time he'd seen her since the break, and she didn't seem all too happy with his radio silence in the interim.

"Black." She greeted stonily. Sirius felt a flush rise up the back of his neck at her cool, collected tone.

"Lily." He replied, voice raspy from disuse, and he coughed before he spoke again. "I'm sorry I-"

He had been intending to say more, but Lily held up a hand for silence.

"You don't need to apologise." She replied, looking down. "I should not have expected a letter."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably, thinking of the unsent letter amongst the sheets of his bed up in the dorm, and then forcibly of the sleeping werewolf – naked after a night of copulation, in the bed across from his.

"I wrote you one." He confessed. "I just never sent it."

Lily seemed to visibly deflate.

"Why not?" She questioned, her previously cold voice turning soft. Sirius shrugged, thinking of all the reasons why not: that he still thought of her as James' girl; that he wasn't sure of his actual

feelings towards her and didn't want to lead her on; that he had some serious thinking to do in regards to his sexuality.

"I just didn't find the time." He lied.

Lily bit her lip.

"I wrote you one too." She mumbled. "I was going to send it but... I kind of wanted to get one from you first."

The boy looked at her then – really looked at her. She was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, with pale skin, a dusting of light freckles, and he didn't think he'd ever get over those eyes. He'd always teased James about his obsession with the girl's eyes, but Merlin's beard might catch fire if they weren't actually made of emeralds.

So why had he slept with Remus and not with her? Was he truly so lonely he thought one nights shagging would keep the werewolf with him, or did he honestly harbor feelings for the boy he had no clue even existed?

Remus and Lily were similar in a lot of ways – they were both prefects, both brave enough to be labelled Gryffindor, both had a similar sense of humour (although Lily would never admit it), and they were both objectively attractive people. But... well Lily was more attractive to Sirius.

"I'm sorry if I-"

Sirius would never find out what Lily had been about to apologise for, because at that moment he made the decision, and leant down to capture her in a deep kiss.

-X-

A rat scuttled out of his cubby hole on the lobby, making a fifth year Hufflepuff let out a small shriek of terror that thankfully went unnoticed to all but her group of friends, and ran down into the dungeons. Once out of sight of any students, the rat morphed back into the shape of a boyishly good-looking Hogwarts student.

Peter Pettigrew paced the corridor for five minutes or so before the people he was looking for arrived. Narcissa Black, flagged by a gaggle of tall, imposing seventh year Slytherins. She sneered at him, then beckoned him to one side.

"What information have you brought little lion?" She purred once they were out of earshot of her cronies. Peter preened at the nickname, and wrung his hands together.

"Sirius is... he's playing two different people." He started. "He kissed Lily Evans this morning, and last night he... he slept with Remus."

Narcissa reacted to this information with little to no concern, but rose an eyebrow at the tidbit diplomatically. For Pete, this was much more of a betrayal than he had ever imagined. Not only was Sirius going after Evans, the girl they'd all sworn off once James had made his intentions to marry her perfectly clear – but he was also messing with the dynamic within the marauders itself. Pete had known for a long time Remus found Sirius attractive, and heck, who wouldn't? But if they had slept together then Sirius had to be playing a complicated game with him – and Pete couldn't risk the marauders falling out over a drunken one-night stand amongst their ranks. He had to do something soon to eliminate all the tension that had been running about them since the beginning of the school year, and in order to do that meant getting rid of the unnecessary additions.

"I see." Replied Narcissa, already looking to leave the Gryffindor, but Pete caught her arm, making her look back at him in alarm.

"We're going to fall apart." He confessed his fears to her. Despite her obvious discomfort in his touch, she placed her own, silky-soft hand over his.

"You've been given our offer little lion. The marauders are destined to fall, and it seems that's sooner than you or I realized." She spoke softly. "Join us. Join Him, and you will never need worry. Our Lord will make sure you are truly rewarded for all loyalty you show."

Pete broke his hand away at the suggestion, heart in turmoil over the offer.

"The other marauders... they don't agree with his methods. With attacks there have been on muggles." He eventually spoke. Narcissa smiled tenderly.

"Well, my little lion... rather them than us."

Friendly

Lily Evans closed her eyes and leaned into the kiss, deepening it by twisting a hand into Sirius' hair, which was beginning to get a bit long for him. Sirius circled a hand around her waist and pulled her flush to him. They continued like this for a moment or two, but then Sirius seemed to snap out of whatever had come over him, and detached.

"Lily..." He breathed, still close to her face so the breath ghosted over her lips. Her pale cheeks flushed at her own name, and she pulled her hand away from his hair, stepping backwards.

"You didn't mean to do that." She guessed, disappointment heavy in her tone. Sirius frowned.

"Not... under these circumstances."

Lily took another step back, crossing her arms over her chest protectively. Sirius reached out to try and stop her from running, but she shook her head and stepped further back.

"Why would you... why would you kiss me if you didn't want to?" She asked, "You were the one that kissed me!" She added, as if trying to clarify. Sirius nodded.

"I know! I think... I think I like you Lily but..." He scrunched up his nose and played with the hem of his shirt nervously. "I did a really stupid thing with someone I care about and I'm really confused right now and I suppose... I thought that maybe if I kissed you..."

Lily glared.

"You thought that if you kissed me it would all just make sense?" She asked, anger in her tone. Sirius reluctantly nodded, and her gaze softened; became sad. "But it didn't work. So maybe... maybe I'm not the one for you."

Sirius grit his teeth and stepped towards her.

"Lily," He began, but Lily held up a hand for silence.

"That other person you care about... did you kiss them?"

Hesitantly, Sirius nodded.

"So maybe they're the one for you?" Lily mumbled, looking down at the ground, and missing Sirius vehemently shaking his head.

"No... Lily..."

But at this point, Lily had turned on her heel and was running up the grand staircase, away from him.

-X-

Regulus slunk down the dungeon corridor moodily, wincing with every step over the fresh bruises on his arms, and across his shoulders. Seeing Remus in the library the day before had been difficult. When the sandy-haired Gryffindor had first arrived amongst the stuffy shelves and sat down amicably at his table, Regulus had at first felt warmed by the boy's seating decision, but as time wore on he began to resent the boy across from him more and more. He'd been so pent up and angry, and covered in such self-worthlessness that he'd eventually snapped at the other boy.

He'd been wearing a new Christmas jumper and Regulus had stupidly allowed himself to imagine the boy unwrapping it on Christmas day and eating mince pies with a loving family. A long way off from the Christmas he'd spent – cold and lonely at school with just Narcissa and her crew of Death Eater cronies for company. The beatings had become more regular, and then they'd uttered those fatal words:

I wonder if your mother would be proud. Maybe we should pay her a little visit.

He'd almost instantly relented, and two days later stood in front of faceless people in dark masks and swore his allegiance to a man who called himself the Dark Lord, and promised blood-purity and death to all else. He felt confused, sick and prideful all at once. He might finally make his mother proud, do the things she'd always dreamt for him to do – but at what cost was he doing it?

He saw Pettigrew up ahead of him, leaning against the wall nonchalantly; the typical pose of all Marauders, and consulting his notes in a handheld wad of parchment. As Regulus approached, his shoes echoing on the floor, the Gryffindor looked up and shot him a winning smile.

"Hey Reg," He grinned. "How're things with you and Pads?"

The question instantly put the Slytherin on edge. Things between himself and his brother had been strained since summer, but had only grown worse in the older sibling's absence over the break. He wasn't about to share that with his companion, however.

"What do you want Pettigrew?" He asked instead, trying to stop himself from glaring too much. Peter detached himself from the wall and slung an arm around the younger boy's shoulders, making him wince as it hit his bruising.

"I've got a proposition for ya kid." He smiled. "And if you play your cards right, then I can stop hanging out in these dungeons, and you will get to see a lot more of your brother."

Regulus frowned, but could already feel himself wavering.

"Alright." He said. "I'm listening."

-X-

A month passed in stony silences and awkward half-conversations for the Marauders. They began to prepare for the countless mock exams they would sit for their OWLs, but two of their number avoided each other's gaze and barely spoke, which put the entire group into a deep funk. James was beginning to get fed up with his friends glaring at each-other across the Gryffindor table at meal times, and awkwardly exchanging notes on the latest transfiguration test. Remus and Sirius had barely spoken two words to each other since term began, and James was finding it harder and harder to resist the pull of the dungeons, where Severus would occupy his time with working on Wolfsbane or, if he was in a good mood, long games of wizards' chess. Ever since their long chat at the beginning of term, where James had attempted to convince Severus to fall in love with him, the Gryffindor had found the boys company more comfortable. Or at least, slightly less threatening. He'd stuck to the rules; he carried out orders as and when they were given to him, which was at least three times a week, but had not delved back into the realms of sexual tension since the end of the break, and he never lied to the Slytherin, even when he was asked personal questions he didn't entirely want to answer. As a reward Severus had been gracious enough to open up about his own home life. James now knew how much of a jerk he'd truly been to the boy, not only had he made the boys' school life hell, he had no idea the boy was going through so much at home as well. Suffice to say, his father was not a very nice man, and even when his mother had been alive she hadn't been much of a role-model. He'd found solace working as an apprentice for a famously testy,

but genius potions master named Berwald Kindhal, who was the creator of the Glacier Elixir. They had found comfort, so obviously something had to upset the balance.

They were sat in Severus' work room, with the Slytherin stirring Wolfsbane with narrowed eyes, muttering under his breath, and James flipping through the pages of one of the many books in Snape's personal library, when he came across the name of a Herbologist that set off an alarm bell in James' mind. Nausea curled in his stomach, and he placed his book down next to him carefully.

"Severus?" He asked, voice coming out small despite himself. The Slytherin looked up at his tone, and James prided himself in the flash of worry he saw grace Severus' face. It was quickly steeled into the usual calm indifference. The boy nodded for James to continue, and the Chaser looked inside himself for some Gryffindor courage before; "What happened with Alex Kemp?"

Severus put down his stirrer, and replaced the old blanket over the potion, gulping audibly. He gave James a look the boy couldn't decipher – at best bet it would be somewhere between anger and disappointment.

"I assume Dumbledore mentioned that name to you." He concluded, "I assume that's the reason he, and yourself, have been pestering me to get our little deal in writing."

James nodded dumbly, biting his lip at the boy's low, concealed tone. Eventually, after some time of deliberation, the Slytherin spoke again.

"He was a Slytherin boy a couple of years above me." He began. "He came down with Cinis and I had already begun working with Kindhal at that point so it came to me to make the Elixir. Alex and I struck up a deal, which he stuck to – a little too well one might say. But I allowed him to pass one week without the antidote he needed." He confessed. James knew as much from Dumbledore, but felt compelled to get more information – after all, he and Alex had been in the same situation. He felt he owed it to the boy.

"He was... he supported..."

"Voldemort, yes."

James shivered at the name, it was barely said around the halls of Hogwarts – people had begun to associate it with bad luck. Attacks on muggles grew daily, and James even knew someone whose parents had been seriously injured because of their blood status, thanks directly to the Death Eaters, as Voldemort's supporters liked to call themselves.

"Couldn't you have... turned him into the Aurors?"

Severus caught eye-contact with him for the first time since their conversation began.

"I want you to understand something." He said, crossing the room and standing directly in front of James. The Gryffindor stood instinctively. When Severus next spoke, it was in a conspiratorial whisper. "If I found out tomorrow that you were a supporter of Voldemort I would just as readily let you die as I did Alex Kemp. You and he are alike in more ways than you might think. My relationship with him was no more or less complicated than it is with you. I was... fond... of his company – and it loathes me to say it but I am fond of yours. I never want you to let that be a comfort to you, for to this day I stand by my decision to allow Alex to die. I will not allow my friends to be used against me; I could not sit back and watch as Voldemort turned him into someone I did not know. That is why I had to be the one to end it."

Severus swept his cloak around him, exiting his workspace and leaving James behind in it in a rare

bout of trustfulness – and James sat down heavily on the sofa again, a balloon swelling up inside his chest and making him feel all at once giddy but like he couldn't breathe. He hated to think that Severus could so easily let him die, but he also couldn't just put aside that he had confessed that they might be friends.

X

The next day James was walking side by side with Sirius as they made their way away from the Quidditch pitch, clad in their scarlet robes and sweaty from the rough match. It was the third match of the season and the second match for Gryffindor. They'd lost out to Hufflepuff in their first match and they'd both been eager to show they wouldn't be repeating the failure. They'd just headed off with Slytherin, and it had been a hard game, but finally they had finished with a victory. Sirius was swinging his beaters bat by his side, but was otherwise moody, despite their win. It was the last week of February and finally the sun was beginning to peek through the clouds, casting a glow on the ground and making the air feel uncharacteristically warm.

"It's hot." James said, trying to make conversation the old British way. Sirius shot him a concerned look.

"It's Monday." He replied. For a second James was stumped by the response, and then realised his friend was referring to Cinis.

"I meant the weather." He clarified, earning him a quick 'oh', before the boys went back to silence.

It was not normal for Sirius to be acting so sullen, but after a month of the behaviour James had all but become used to it. It wasn't as if he and Remus were fighting all the time, but they were simply ignoring each other unless they couldn't help it. James couldn't pick up on any anger between them; it was more just awkwardness – like one of them had walked in on the other doing the dirty (except with a shared dorm, that happened more than you'd think, so that probably wasn't it). There was no play fighting, or play flirting happening between the two boys – there wasn't even real fighting or real flirting (which James was sure slipped in there sometimes), it just wasn't normal behaviour.

There was, of course, always the possibility that Remus had finally snapped and confessed he had the hots for Pads (because of course James knew of Remus' feelings; they lived in close quarters and James had subtly ignored the werewolf checking out Sirius' arse repeatedly since they found out the boy was gay), but it seemed highly unlikely that Remus would risk their friendship after so many years of pressing down those feelings every time the Black boy called him a stupid pet-name.

Eventually, he decided to just come out and ask.

"So what's the deal man? You and Moony have barely spoken in weeks."

Sirius kicked the grass as they walked, swinging his bat again, this time slightly more aggressively. He shrugged.

"We did something really stupid and I thought we were okay but he's kind of mad at me." He replied.

"What did you do?"

Sirius puffed out a big breath of air, and James decided not to mention that his ears had gone bright red.

"Just... something stupid. I don't want to talk about it."

James bit his lip.

"Okay... but how are you going to make it up to Moony?"

Sirius kicked the grass again. Both boys looked a bit further ahead, where Remus was sat by the lake, practising turning the flower next to him into a quill and then back again.

"I'll go talk to him, I guess." Sirius replied, giving James a pat on the shoulder and then walking over to the werewolf. James nodded after him, and then started making his way back up to the castle.

Body Contact

James made his way back into the castle, having made sure Sirius had actually gone to the lake to talk to Remus. Hopefully with the two of them actually speaking to each other about whatever had made them fall out, things could go back to relative normal between the Marauders. For the meantime, James would go and find Severus, because they had recently become much more friendly with each other, and it was nice to be able to chat with the boy when he needed to.

He found the boy, as predicted, in his work room.

"Did you see me play?" He asked as he entered. Severus was adding some dried beetles to one of the three potions brewing on one side of the work space, and James was glad to see that it wasn't the Glacier Elixir. He sat down on the sofa casually. Severus looked up from his potion, threw a blanket over the fumes, and came to sit with the Gryffindor.

"I don't care for Quidditch." He stated, and it warmed James' heart to see he was once again making use of the hairband James had bought him for Christmas. He frowned on hearing the words though.

"Shame, because we kicked your team's asses." He explained. Severus rolled his eyes.

"I am sure you did. Why are you here?" The Slytherin replied. James frowned some more.

"Because I like your company." He responded, honestly. The two had grown close over the last month or so – James no longer felt the need to pussy-foot around the Slytherin, and was comfortable in his wake. Severus sent him a trade-mark smirk.

"Then I've an order for you."

The words put James on edge. It had been awhile since the boy's last order and the tone in his voice told him this time it would be a much more embarrassing ordeal. He flushed, thinking about over the holidays, when he had been ordered to touch himself in Broadsands Bay, or when he'd been ordered to recite a love letter to the boy. He steeled his courage before nodding.

"What can I do for you?" He asked. Severus stood, making his way over to the Gryffindor, and leant down over him so that he could feel the boy's breath on his face, and had to press himself back into the sofa in an attempt to regain some personal space. He gulped audibly, making the Slytherin chuckle deep in his throat in a way that made James' trousers feel suddenly quite tight.

"A month ago I told you to show me why I should fall in love with you – and you've made me fond of your company, but love isn't just about being friendly, now, is it?" He began. James shook his head, noting how their noses were almost touching. Snape put a large hand on his knee, making James' leg jolt up at the touch. He cursed himself inwardly. He was better than this. He should know how to conduct himself around the Slytherin by now. Severus smirked once more. "Now I want you to show me that your body can please me too."

James felt his mouth drop open at the words. Was that his order? He felt his trousers tighten a little

more at the idea, relenting that it wasn't that he wasn't glad of the opportunity to show Severus what he had, but that he honestly would have no clue where to begin. Severus leant forward slightly, pressing a light kiss to his lips, making James give an embarrassing little whimper. He bit his lip when Severus pulled away.

"How?" He asked, though he was reluctant to admit he wasn't sure what Severus wanted him to do.

The Slytherin stood up, pulling James by the hand so they were stood next to each other, and then he pushed James shoulders so that the Gryffindor was kneeling in front of him. James felt his ears burn, suddenly having a very good idea of exactly what Severus wanted him to do. He gulped down a lump that had formed in his throat – remembering how he'd felt back in the cave in Broadsands Bay. He'd been angry then, that Severus had taken advantage of him – but this felt different, like the Slytherin was just giving him a chance to prove himself. Looking in front of him he could see the beginnings of a bulge behind Sev's heavy robes, and couldn't help but let out a low moan at the thought of it. He swallowed thickly, wondering whether he actually had the courage to do it.

"Would you disobey an order?" Severus asked, voice husky, and James looked up to see his pupils blown. It was encouraging to know that at least Severus liked what he saw. The Gryffindor shook his head, re-adjusting himself on his knees and reaching out to part the boys school robes. Before he could make a start on pulling down the boy's jeans, however, Snape seemed to change his mind. "Wait – stand up. I want you to strip."

James coloured at the idea, but obediently stood on command. He undid his shirt buttons with shaking hands, and pulled it down over his shoulders, reminding himself it wasn't the first time Severus had seen him naked. He slowly undid his belt buckle and in a swift motion pushed his trousers and pants down to his feet, kicking them off, along with his socks and shoes. He wanted to kneel again, to cross his arms over himself and cover himself up, but Severus was eyeing him curiously, and would tell him if he was allowed to move. Eventually, the Slytherin nodded and James dropped to his knees thankfully.

He quickly made work of the Slytherins jeans and underwear, trying to put them on a more even playing field, and as he dragged down the material he remembered just how well-endowed the boy was from his full frontal eye-full a few months prior. He felt like he was staring down a monster; a monster that was thick with girth and curled slightly to the left near the tip. His mouth filled with saliva in anticipation and if he wasn't so consumed with the task at hand he would have berated himself in his obvious eagerness.

"Go ahead." The Slytherin encouraged, and despite staring down the boy's manhood, he jumped at his voice – almost forgetting the cock in front of him was actually attached to someone. He licked his lips in anticipation, making Severus chuckle in the way that made James ache with need. He pushed out his hand to stroke the boy in front of him, and when he was rewarded with a gentle intake of breath, he leant forward so he could lick the underside of it hesitantly. He thought it might taste bad, but it was just skin. He licked up the underside, and looked up to the boy he was attempting to please.

Severus was watching him with those impossibly dark eyes, pupils wide and his mouth slightly open, taking in short, shallow breaths. James thought it might be the hottest thing he'd ever seen. In response, he swirled his tongue up to the top of the boy's dick and closed his lips around the head. Instantly he felt an unfamiliar salty taste on his tongue, and widened his eyes when he realized it was Severus pre-come. He closed his eyes to avoid Severus' gaze, and began licking his way down the shaft, sucking as he went and trying to avoid catching it with his teeth. He wanted to show Severus he was worth it, that he could do anything he put his mind to – including giving an

excellent blow-job, if that was what the Slytherin wanted, but he only got half way down before the tip hit the back of his throat and he instinctively gagged. Severus bucked into his mouth at the feeling, making James wrench himself away.

"S-sorry!" He spluttered, wiping away the drool which had pooled on his bottom lip. Severus grunted in response.

"Try again." He mumbled, tangling a hand into James bird-nest hair and pulling his face forward. James willingly opened his mouth, swallowing what was given to him as Severus pushed in, and this time readied himself for when it hit the back of his throat. He put a hand on the base of the Slytherin's cock and the other hand on his hip to try and hold him in place, and then resumed his up and down motion of sucking, using his hand to stimulate the base, where his mouth couldn't reach. After a while of the slow, steady rhythm James had adopted, Severus allowed his hand to fall from his hair and caress his hollowed out cheek. He blew out a long breath before: "Merlin, James – you look so pretty like that." He stated, making the boy flush and his dick throb in need. Severus pushed him away, and then pulled him to his feet. James rubbed at his jaw, which was beginning to get sore.

"Did I do something wrong?" He asked. Severus shook his head. He pulled the Gryffindor forward and caught him in a deep kiss which had James feeling weak at the knees. When they were finished, the Slytherin held him firmly in place.

"You looked so desperate to be fucked, sucking my cock like that." He replied, voice impossibly low. James had never thought of himself as one for dirty-talk, but his dick throbbed once more at the words. He nodded dumbly, letting out a string of 'yeses' he would be mortified of later when he came to his senses. Severus chuckled that deep, sensual chuckle. "Is that what you want James? To be fucked by my cock?"

James nodded again, averting his eyes and looking down at the Slytherin's thick dick, which was glistening with James' saliva and pre-come. Severus put a strong finger under his chin and forced him to look up.

"You have to say it." He said. "You have to tell me how much you want it."

James could feel himself heating up at the idea. It was far too much. He could do as Severus requested, he could listen to the boy say filthy things about him, but he wasn't sure he could say them in return. He opened his mouth to try, but the words got stuck in his throat. He tried to reach forward, to capture Severus in a kiss and show him how much he wanted it, but Severus held him steadfast in position. The Slytherin repeated himself, this time with a hint of anger to his voice that sent a spark of electricity through James, right to his dick. He swallowed and tried again.

"I... I want you to... f-fuck. I want you to fuck me." He mumbled, proud of himself for not breaking eye contact with the black eyed boy. Severus smirked, before ridding himself of his remaining clothes and stepping forwards so their naked bodies were flush against each other. He brushed his lips against James' ear, which sent a shiver through the boy, and whispered:

"Beg."

James felt a curl of nausea in his stomach, mixed confusingly with his overwhelming desire for everything Severus was offering. He nodded his registration of the boy's command.

"Please." He said, feeling ridiculous.

"Please what?" Severus asked. James crossed an arm over his stomach self-consciously, breaking

eye-contact.

"Please... fuck me."

Severus wasted no time in making James' wishes come true. He pushed the boy back down on the sofa, grabbing one leg in both hands and spreading them wide so James was fully exposed beneath him. James brought his arms up to cover his face in a bout of embarrassment, and felt, rather than saw, the Slytherin descend on him. The next thing he knew something warm and wet was prodding and swirling around his hole – the most private part of his body. He jolted up the sofa but Severus held him in place, flicking his tongue in a way that made James groan in pleasure and have to use every muscle in his body not to push back against the feeling. Severus stopped, hovering just above him, and blew warm air on to the previously assaulted hole, ensuring a high pitched keen from James, who was struggling with the overwhelming feelings. Severus teased with a wet tongue and hot air for what felt like eons until James finally snapped.

"Fuck Severus, I want your dick in me!" He yelled, before calming down enough to realize what he'd exclaimed and squeaked in embarrassment. Severus chuckled, and repositioned himself so he was hovering over James face, still between the boy's legs. He gently pried James' hands away from his face, where they had yet to leave.

"You'll have to exercise patience." He told the Gryffindor. "Trust me when I say without the proper preparation you will not enjoy this."

James felt small and inexperienced at the words, but relented to let Snape take the lead when he felt a long bony finger probing his sensitive ass. The boy muttered a spell James knew all too well, and cold stickiness erupted from his hole. He shivered at the sensation, but gasped when Severus' finger went in without protest. Within minutes it was joined by another, which twisted and turned until James was a writhing mess underneath the other boy. Finally, finally the Slytherin positioned himself and began pushing himself into James.

The Gryffindor held his breath and tried not to scream at the feeling. It was all at once way too much and nowhere near enough. It hurt like a bitch, but James knew if Severus tried to pull away at this point it would be the end of him. He blew out his breath and tried to focus on proper breathing techniques and relaxing. Finally, the sting subsided, and James could focus on the stretch and feeling of fullness.

Then Severus started to move.

"Oh fuck, oh Merlin. Oh my wand, Severus!"

Severus smirked, but when James opened his eyes he could see the boy was concentrating on what he was doing, and not much on what James had to say – well, scream.

He thrust deeply into him, almost instantly picking up an insane pace which left James a screaming, huffing mess. James was beginning to think that he would pass out when Severus wrapped his hand around the Gryffindor's flagging dick and began to pump it back into full hardness. Between the two sensations of pulling and pounding, James was a hot-mess in less than ten minutes, shouting incoherently as he spurted over himself. Not thirty seconds later Severus had joined him with a grunt, and collapsed on top of the Chaser.

Laying there, in the aftermath and the quiet, trying to quell his over-beating heart, James turned to the Slytherin, who was smiling at the ceiling serenely.

"Did I do it? Have I completed your order?" He asked. Severus turned to him with a frown, but it

quickly rearranged itself into his usual look of cool indifference.

"You completed the order." He repeated.

Mask

Sirius slowed down as he approached the lake, and watched the giant squid flop its tentacles around lazily for a moment, before alerting the werewolf to his presence.

"Hey." He said in greeting, but Remus showed no signs that he'd heard him. Sirius sighed. "Hey." He repeated, with more force this time, making Remus look round.

"You know I can be civil when we are around others, but I really don't want to talk to you at all." The werewolf said, and then returned his gaze to the flower he was transfiguring, as if assuming that Sirius would just give up and walk away. Sirius swallowed back a retort he was about to make.

"I know what we did was stupid Moony, but you had a part in it to." He reasoned, voice gentle, and watched as Remus shook his head, tutting. The werewolf brought his knees up and embraced them, and Sirius sat down next to him.

"Fuck Sirius, do you really think I care that we had sex?" He asked, ignoring Sirius' blush. "Yeah, that was stupid, but you're right, we both played a part in that. I'm the one that initiated it."

"Then what are you so annoyed about?" Sirius asked, poking his friend in what he thought was a funny way. Remus' eyes were cold and set, and refusing to look at his friend.

"I'm annoyed because it meant a lot more to me than it did to you."

Sirius swallowed. He'd thought that might have been the case.

"I took advantage of you." he admitted. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have allowed it to go that far. I should have been more considerate of-"

"Please don't say my feelings." Remus cut him off. "Like you said, it takes two to tango... just..."

"Just what?"

Remus sighed, transfigured his flower once more, and then turned to look Sirius in the eye.

"Just that I came down stairs the next morning to a bunch of gossip about you kissing Lily in the hallway." He eventually admitted. "And I... I don't want to be one of your whores."

Sirius swore under his breath.

"I'd never think of you that way." He promised, but Remus shook his head.

"I know, but... that's how I think of myself."

Sirius drew in a deep breath, then carefully put his hand on the side of his neck, where a month later it was still tender from the love-bite Remus had left there. The bruise had disappeared in a week or so, with the help of some concealer charms he'd never had to worry about anyone seeing,

but every time he thought of that spot or touched it, it throbbed slightly.

"How can I make you see that you are so much more than just a one-night-stand to me?" He asked. "Did you want to... date? Or something?"

For the first time in a month Sirius watched as Remus broke into a genuine smile. The werewolf shook his head.

"I can't imagine anything worse than dating you." He mumbled. Then sighed. "I'm sorry Sirius. I'm not even mad at you, I'm mad at myself. I... I like someone else. The only reason I slept with you was because I couldn't sleep with them."

Sirius nodded.

"Well, I slept with you because I was lonely and curious as to why our entire dorm appears to be gay, so I win."

Remus laughed, and Sirius would be damned if it wasn't the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. And that time he meant it completely platonically; he'd really missed the werewolf's friendship.

"I'm pretty sure it's just me, and James is like... bi. And... you're maybe bi-curious..." Remus replied. "Well, Pete's straight."

Sirius laughed to, because he could probably deal with bi-curious.

"So are you going to tell me who this boy is you like?" He teased. Remus looked at him for a long moment.

"No. No I'm not." He decided. "Now, we have a mock-test tomorrow to study for."

Sirius rolled his eyes, but the two boys made their way back towards the castle together.

X

Sirius walked out of their mock exam the next day stretching and yawning, as he made his way through the grand doors and into the grounds with Remus. Pete had dragged James away to help with a favor, and promised the two of them would catch up in a minute. The boys walked away discussing the exam, with Remus making some good humored jokes about the werewolf questions, and true to his word, James and Pete caught them up and they all reached the old oak tree they used to study under together. The sun was high in the sky again, and they'd gained the afternoon off classes as a reward for doing the mock test, so they decided to make use of the time they had to chill out for a bit. It seemed most fifth years had the same idea and there were groups of teenagers all over the grounds, some studying, some goofing off. James sat down and pulled out a snitch from his pocket, beginning to let it go and catch it. Pete was watching him carefully. Sirius sat down and watched as well, as James kept stealing glances over at Lily Evans and her friends, who were studying by the lake.

It was odd behavior, Sirius had more than got the impression James was no longer interested in the red-head, especially with the whole misguided crush on Snape thing. God, he'd give anything to hex that slimy bat, but with James' illness, it was an obvious no-go.

"I'm bored." He announced. Remus had produced a book from his bag and was skimming it. They had another mock tomorrow to look forward to.

"If you're so bored you could test me, here..." The werewolf held out the book for Sirius to take,

but Sirius simply snorted, bashing it away.

"I don't need to look at that rubbish, I know it all."

He let his eyes wonder around and spotted Snape wondering in their general direction.

"This'll liven you up, Padfoot." James said under his breath. "Look who it is..."

Sirius looked around at Snape again, and thought the only way his appearance would liven him up is if he could hex him – But again, it was out of the question.

"All right, Snivellus?" James called, making everyone's head whip towards him. Had James really just... even knowing his life was on the line?

Snape acted on instinct to the old familiar name-calling, and had dived into his robes for his wand, but no sooner was it in the air than it was flung out of his hands by James' shout of 'Expelliarmus!'. He stood, pointing his own wand at Snape. Sirius stood half incredulously, copying James' movements and pointing his own wand at Snivellus. He couldn't deny it felt good to be back in the familiar position. He watched as Snape dived for his wand and shouted;

"Impedimenta!"

The Slytherin, half way through his dive, fell flat on the floor. Other students had begun to edge closer to the scene, some looking apprehensive, others looking entertained. Sirius flung a look behind him to see Pete edging around James to see what was happening with a concerned look. James glanced over at the waters' edge, where Lily was sat and Sirius briefly wondered if he was still trying to impress her. It felt like old times, like they could go back to a time before James had become ill. It felt good.

X

Pete felt like laughing. This was all so easy! All he had to do was crush the budding relationship between James and Snape, and then bring Lily into it, and goad Sirius into saying something that would push her away too. In his new polyjuiced induced James-skin, it was hardly difficult to do. Get Regulus along for the ride to polyjuice into him and sit quietly and even if James tried to deny that he had bullied Snape later, no suspicion would be on Pete. He stole a glance at Lily by the lake, hoping she had cottoned on to the scene, and would soon be over to but her nose in, like she usually would. Now to tease the Slytherin.

"How'd the exam go Snivelly?"

"I was watching him; his nose was touching the parchment." Interjected Sirius, laughing. There was a hint of viciousness in his voice, and Pete could tell he'd been wanted to have a go at Snape for a long time. There was a lot of pent up frustration that he'd been biting his tongue on, due to James' illness. Pete had had the same issue, and it felt nice to finally get the chance to rip into the Slytherin again. Sirius carried on. "There'll be great grease marks all over it, they won't be able to read a word!"

Several people in the growing crowd laughed outright, and Pete knew it wouldn't be long until Lily was on the scene. Everything was going swimmingly, he reveled as Snape struggled to get up under the jinx he was under.

"You – wait." He panted, looking directly at Pete – in James' skin. For a moment he wondered if Snape might actually stop making the Elixir, but then brushed it aside – no one was cruel enough to let someone die over a bit of teasing. Snape glared at him. "You – wait."

"Wait for what?" Sirius asked, voice dripping icicles. "What are you going to do, Snivelly? Wipe your nose on us?"

Pete grinned, but Snape let out a string of swearwords and curses that might have been painful had he had use of his wand, but with it being out of his reach, all it did was make Pete smirk.

"Wash your mouth out!" He teased, "Scourgify!"

Bubbled erupted from Snape's mouth as if he was a rabid dog, and he struggled, choking on the sensation. It was then that Lily made her appearance.

"Leave him ALONE!" She yelled. Both boys turned, and Peter imitated James perfectly, letting his hand jump to his head.

"All right, Evans?" He asked.

"Leave him alone." She repeated. "What's he done to you?"

Pete smirked, looking back at the Slytherin, who was still foaming at the mouth.

"Well," He said, imitating what James would have said in this situation, back before he'd become ill and turned into the Slytherins personal play-thing. "It's more of the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean..."

Most of the crowd laughed, and Pete could help but grin at the reaction.

"You think you're funny." Said Lily coldly, "But you're just an arrogant, bullying toe-rag, Potter! Leave him alone!"

Pete thought about what James would do, and also something that would enrage Lily. He almost hit himself, the answer was so obvious.

"I will if you go out with me, Evans." He said. "Go on... go out with me and I'll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again." He lied. He didn't notice the jinx Sirius had put on Snape wearing off, or that Snape was inching towards his wand, spitting out the soap as he went. Lily reacted just as Pete hoped she would.

"I wouldn't go out with you if it was a choice between you and giant squid!"

Original, Pete thought, like he hadn't heard that one before. Sirius gave a laid back laugh.

"Bad luck Prongs." He said, and Pete momentarily forgot he was James, and didn't immediately grin back at the boy. Sirius turned, and saw Snape reaching for his wand. "Oi!"

Snape already had his hand on his wand though, and pointed it at James' face. A flash of light, and then a gash appeared on James' cheekbone. Pete stumbled, anger flaring. How dare that dungeon bat? He whirled so he was fully facing the Slytherin, and decided now was the time to use the spell James had taught him. James had said it was a spell that Snape had invented, one that he'd been taught in one of their cozy little hang-out sessions of late. When James had taught it to Pete he had done it with a sense of awe, whilst reveling in just how 'amazing' Snape was. Well, thought Pete, it would be a real kick in the balls to be attacked by your own spell.

There was another flash of light, and then Snape was hanging upside down. His robes fell down over his head to reveal long legs and greying underpants. The crowd cheered, even those who had at first looked concerned. Sirius was roaring with laughter, and Lily glared.

"Let him down."

"Certainly." Replied Pete, jerking his wand away so that Snape fell to the ground in a heap. He disentangled himself from his robes and got to his feet, raising his wand for a counter attack, but Sirius was alert.

"Petrificus Totalus." He spelled, and Snape went down again, rigid.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lily shouted, her rage obviously bubbling over as she glared at Sirius. She pointed her wand at the boys, and they both looked at his apprehensively.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you." Pete warned, trying to act cool.

"Take the curse off him then."

Pete sighed heavily, turned to Snape and muttered the counter curse.

"There you go." He said as Snape struggled to his feet. "You're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus!"

"I don't need help from filthy little mudbloods like her!" Snape shouted back. Lily blinked, surprise written on her face. Sirius frowned heavily.

"Fine." She said after a moment, her tone cold like ice. "I won't bother in future. And... I'd wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus."

She crossed her arms defensively, and Pete could tell she was trying not to cry.

"Apologise to Evans." He said, trying to sound like James. Sirius had his wand pointed at Snape with a glare so furious Pete thought he might actually use an unforgivable. Lily huffed.

"I don't want you to make him apologise!" She shouted, glaring at Pete, in James' skin. She sent a look at Sirius, and Pete could tell she wanted Sirius to make Sniv apologise. "You're as bad as he is."

"What?" Pete yelped at the statement. "I would never call you a – You-know-what!"

Lily rolled her eyes.

"Messing with your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you've just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can – I'm surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it! You make me SICK!" She shouted, shaking her head. She turned on her heel and hurried away.

"Evans!" Pete half-hearted shouted after her, "Hey, Evans!"

Lily, however, didn't look back.

"What's with her?" He asked, trying to sound like he was truly worried. Sirius rolled his eyes, his wand by his side, his expression sullen. Pete knew that the fight with Lily had upset him, hopefully some more Snape goading would make him happier again.

"Reading between the lines, I'd say she thinks you're a bit conceited, mate." He replied, and he smiled like it was a joke, but his tone came out bitter.

"Right." Replied Pete. "Right."

Another flash of light later and Snape was back in the air, upside down. Sirius, this time, kept his wand by his side and didn't look at the Slytherin or tease him.

"Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?" Pete asked the crowd.

Whether Pete would have gone through with that, however, would never be known, because at that point he was hit from behind with a well-placed hex from James. Snape fell to the floor and quickly hurried away. Sirius stared in horror at the sight before him.

Two James'?

Consequences

Sirius watched as the James that he had been messing around picked himself up off the ground, and then raced away towards the forbidden forest, with Pete hot on his tails. The James who had sent the hex had put his wand away, and was staring at the back of Snape's robes, who was retreating into the castle.

"What happened?" He asked, voice low and full of the rage Sirius knew he had been battling with since he'd fallen ill. Sirius couldn't meet his eye, he had foolishly been lead along into goading Snape – the James stood before him now was clearly the same James he'd known since he was eleven, the one who had been growing close to Snape since the year began; and Sirius may have just ruined all that. He felt sick thinking about what the consequences of his actions might be, and started running towards the castle, after his enemy.

"Snape!" He called as he neared the boy, heading towards the dungeons.

"Fuck off Black." Was the reply.

"Wait... You've got to understand what really happened out there. James was -"

"I know what happened out there!" Snape whirled round and pinned Sirius to the nearest wall. "You and Potter got bored of this charade you have been running all year. And to think I..."

"You what?" asked Sirius, trying to use his best calming voice.

"Nothing." Snape spat, letting go of where had pinned Sirius to the wall. "It doesn't matter."

Sirius sighed, straightening his school tie.

"I'm sorry I hexed you." He said, looking at his shoes, because he couldn't really believe he was apologizing to the Slytherin. "Please don't blame James for this, that wasn't him."

Severus looked at him for a long moment.

"I think that was exactly who he is." He eventually replied. He turned on his heel to walk away, but Sirius couldn't let him go thinking that James was to blame, so he called out after him.

"Are you who we all think you are then? The man who would call Lily a Mudblood?"

Snape span around again, pinning Sirius once more to the dungeon wall in a fit of rage.

"She should have just kept out of it!" He snarled.

"She's better than that." Sirius replied, chest swelling just thinking about her. "She sees something in you that I don't. I think it's the same thing James sees in you."

Snape grunted.

"It is of no consequence. You are unable to change my decision; the same way James Potter is evidently incapable of change."

Sirius slammed his fist against the wall in frustration, which resulted in little more than a nasty cut on his knuckles.

"That wasn't James!" He repeated exasperatedly. Snape jeered.

"That was everything I have ever thought you and he to be." He jibed back. "You may have had me fooled over Christmas, but today you have shown your true colours once more!"

"Why won't you believe me?" Sirius asked, cradling his aching hand.

"Because you're a traitor Black." Snape replied. "You betray everyone you know, you betrayed my trust, James' dependency on you and you're a blood-traitor to boot!"

Sirius would not be proud of it later on, but upon the words he saw red, and a plan seemed to spring into his mind fully formed. He bit his lip and counted to ten to stop from shouting at the boy in front of him, and then began to speak.

"You're right." He started, "Let me make it up to you, if you'll let me. Go to the Whomping Willow – about 8 o'clock on Wednesday. Use a long stick to prod that knot at the base of the trunk and there's a secret passage underneath. Follow it the whole way to the end and there will be something there to make this up to you."

Snape glared at him.

"Why should I believe a word you say?" He asked. Sirius shrugged, looking at his feet once more.

"You don't have to... I'm just... I'm tired of all this."

- X -

Two days later Sirius was in the Charms hallway, once again alone. He hadn't been able to speak to James since the incident after their exam, and had only got a few tidbits of information out of Remus. According to the werewolf, James had said he couldn't remember who had attacked him, but he'd woken up in a broom closet and had come outside to meet them, only to see Sirius with the Fake-James, bullying Severus. James had refused to speak to him since. Sirius had tried to apologise, but the Chaser was stubborn, and would attach himself to anyone nearby as an excuse not to speak with his best friend. Sirius had seen him pacing outside the dungeons the day prior, so could only assume Snape was yet to realise it had not been the real James that had attacked him in the grounds. He was pondering on a new way to get James to speak with him, when he bumped gently into someone going the other way.

"Oh, Lily."

The red-head took in a deep breath and gave him a quick once-over that usually would have had the troublemakers head swelling with pride, but in this instance made him feel uncharacteristically self-conscious. Eventually, she smiled. Sirius thought it was a blessing to see, especially after he had directly gone against her wishes in bullying her friend.

She held out a letter for him to read.

"It's from Petunia." She said in way of explanation. Sirius took the envelope with new found interest. "I want you to read it. You know, I took your advice and said sorry, and she's finally

written to me."

"That's great." Sirius replied, trying to put some energy into his words. He mostly just felt guilty. He unfolded the letter in his hands and took a quick skim; the handwriting was curly, like Lily's was, and there was at least two pages, double-sided, of words. He gulped down the lump that had formed in his throat. "I'm sorry, Lily. I shouldn't have attacked Snape the other day – and I should have let him be when you asked me to. I wasn't being considerate of you."

Lily was quiet for a moment, and Sirius thought she might throw his apology back in his face, but then she nodded and smiled.

"Thank you for apologizing." She said. "You know... I really wanted you to make him apologise to me when he said that – but then I wouldn't be any better than him, or you and James. I want him to apologise of his own accord, then maybe I can forgive him."

Sirius nodded.

"I wanted to hex him so bad when he said that Lils, I thought I might do something stupid."

Lily put a hand on his upper arm and squeezed, and a flurry of heat sprung up there, making Sirius want to grin stupidly.

"I'm glad you didn't," She told him, then gestured towards the letter she had given him, which was unfurled in the boy's hand. "Keep the letter – I have it memorized. It might remind you how important family is. Maybe it's time you spoke to your brother?"

Sirius glanced around the hall, almost wondering whether his brother might just turn up out of the blue to have a chat. Lily leant forward and pressed a feather-light kiss to his cheek, making him blink in surprise.

"I think I like you." She confessed, backing away again. "But you need to figure out who you are, and who you want to be, before we can..." She made an awkward wave of her hand between the two of them, which Sirius found oddly adorable.

She turned to leave, but Sirius caught her arm just before she got out of reaching distance. He brought her back and kissed her forehead.

"Thank you."

X

The next time Sirius saw his brother another few days had past. He spotted the younger Black in the entrance hall, chatting to Remus, from the top of the stairs – where he was making his way down to breakfast with Pete in tow. From what he could see both boys appeared to be reserved and formal in their stances, but then Regulus said something evidently hilarious, because Remus' laugh could be heard across the room. Sirius had never thought of the boys as close, but when he thought about it, it wasn't an uncommon occurrence to see the two boys conversing as of late.

As he came up to them he clapped Remus on the back animatedly.

"Not flirting with my little bro, are we Moony?"

Remus jumped, flushing at the insinuation.

"Don't be ridiculous!" He exclaimed. "We were just talking. I'm allowed to talk. We can talk!"

Sirius rose one eyebrow, looking at Pete to see if he was seeing the same thing he was. Remus was definitely acting weird. He brushed it off as Remus being ultra-sensitive about people finding out his sexual orientation again, and let it slide.

"Chill man, no one was actually saying you're a Back Door Bandit okay?" He said, then turned his attention to his little brother, who had snorted at his and Moonys' interaction, but was otherwise keeping a cool façade in the face of his older sibling. "We need to talk." He directed to his younger lookalike.

Regulus took a step back instinctively, glancing at Pete, and then at Remus.

"I don't want to." I said, and despite how he often tried to act cool and collected, he sounded childish when he said it. Sirius rolled his eyes.

"I'm not giving you a choice. You can't ignore me forever."

Once more, Regulus looked at Pete, who was adjusting the cuffs of his school shirt nonchalantly.

"Not here, not now." Regulus replied.

"Then when?"

Regulus looked at the expensive dragon-hide watch on his wrist. Sirius had a similar one on his own. Their father had given it as a gift when he had started Hogwarts years before, but despite almost constant wearing, the watch didn't look worn in any way.

"Tonight, seven o'clock, by the greenhouses." Regulus decided on. "And... I want it to be just us." He added, sending another look towards Wormtail. Sirius nodded, shrugging at the demands.

"See you then, little brother."

Death Eater

Sirius met his brother out by the greenhouses, as requested, at 7 o'clock that evening. He'd forgone the school robes, and had dressed up warm due to the still chilly weather, in a deep crimson jumper and skin-tight black jeans. He pulled his hair back off his face and waited as Regulus approached from the castle in a crisp white shirt and black slacks. They stood, facing each other, for a moment. Eventually Regulus broke into a fit of tears.

"Fuck, Reg-" Sirius uttered, stepping forward and placing his hands on his younger brother's shoulders. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence for the younger Black to burst into sobs. Despite trying to act cool at school, Sirius had grown up with the boy, and at home he was a regular cry-baby. Regulus tried to wipe away his tears, but he had a baseball-sized lump in his throat and no matter how much he balled the back of his hands into his eyes the tears refused to stop coming. Sirius finally pulled him into an awkward embrace. "Hey, I've missed you. Even the crying." He confirmed.

Regulus choked out a laugh between sobs.

"I – I missed you – you too." He cried, wrapping his arms around his brother. "I've been so – so mad at you!"

"Why?" Sirius asked, pulling away and holding Regulus at arms-length. The younger boy finally managed to dry up his tears, although his cheeks were still strained a rosy red. He looked down at the floor, struggling slightly under his older brother's hold.

"Because you left." He confessed. Sirius sighed, almost angrily.

"You mean in Summer? I asked you to come with me." He excused, but Regulus just shook his head, closing his eyes and counting to ten to stop an onslaught of tears.

"I couldn't go with you. Mum was a wreck, and she only got worse – but you never cared." He accused. "I asked you not to go."

Sirius let go of his brother's shoulders, balling his hands into fists at his sides.

"You know what that house was like for me. I couldn't stay. It would have destroyed me." He replied, anger seeping into his tone. He would have thought that Regulus would have understood. The younger sibling bit his lip. There was silence for a long period.

"You leaving destroyed our family." He finally said. "It destroyed me."

Sirius visibly deflated. He wanted to hug his brother again, but the boy had put on his usual school act of calm and collected and had crossed his arms across his chest defiantly.

"I'm sorry." The older finally said. He seemed to be apologizing a lot, but he thought of Lily and Petunia, and how saying sorry could mend a relationship. Regulus shrugged.

"I need to tell you something." He said. "Peter Pettigrew, he's a Death Eater."

Sirius frowned.

"You shouldn't joke about things like that." He responded. "It could seriously hurt his reputation."

Regulus rolled his eyes, taking a step towards his brother.

"You have to trust me. I know what he is. He's a Death Eater who's been feeding information on you and your friends to other Death Eaters since the school year began." He explained. "It's nothing much at the moment but one day he'll tell them something which will be deadly."

Sirius scoffed.

"Even if that were true, why would the Death Eaters want information on us?" He asked, Regulus shrugged in response.

"Maybe they think you'll grow into a threat – maybe they're looking for new recruits. You and your friends are some of the smartest kids at Hogwarts and The Dark Lord keeps an eye on smart kids."

Sirius shook his head.

"I don't know why you're trying to sell this lie." He admitted, making Regulus stamp his foot in a fit of childish frustration.

"You're right that The Dark Lord doesn't much care for kids, but he inducts them into his ranks so that when they come of age they're well and truly devoted to him. It's reasonable that he's inducted Pete and is looking to do the same with the rest of the marauders!"

Sirius snorted another derivative laugh, and then stopped and surveyed his brother.

"Only his supporters call him 'The Dark Lord'." He stated.

For a long minute you could hear the hubbub of students inside the castle of the silence of the two boys next to the greenhouses. Then Regulus nodded.

"I was inducted over the Christmas break." He confessed. "It's how I know that Pettigrew is one too."

Sirius balled his hands into fists and brought one up, dragging his younger brother forward by the collar of his shirt. He looked into the boy's eyes, as if searching for the truth in them. Eventually, he roughly pushed the younger boy away, so that he fell to the ground.

"Why?" He asked. Regulus snorted angrily, standing up again. He dragged one hand through his curls and regarded his older brother.

"You have no idea what it's like." He told the Gryffindor.

"I lived in that house too! I had the same pressures from mum and dad!"

Regulus laughed, but it was cold.

"You stayed there over the holidays, but it was never your home. Your home was here, in Gryffindor tower, with your supportive friends, and places to go for the holidays!" He shot back. "I had Death Eaters at every turn, repeatedly beating me up to get me to join. I had mum back home

still thinking you lived with us half the time, hysterically screaming when she realized you didn't!" He pulled up his sleeves to reveal the bruises that had yet to heal.

Sirius leveled him with a stony glare.

"That's all going to be so much worse now you've signed yourself over to a blood-purist mass-murderer!" He stated, and Regulus nodded along. "Why didn't you speak to me? Why didn't you ask for help?"

Regulus smirked.

"I couldn't risk it." He confessed. "They threatened to go after mum, or you. I know what they do is bad, but I couldn't let them hurt mum."

Sirius shook his head.

"Neither mum or I our innocent – they'll ask you to kill innocents." He snapped, reaching out and punching the boy, who went over, wiping his lip, which had split on the impact. Regulus spat some blood on the ground. "You think I want to be alive to watch you kill innocent people? I'd rather be dead!"

Regulus stood back up, punching his brother in return, and when Sirius fell, he jumped on top, punching him again and again, despite his brothers struggles.

"I'd rather be dead!" The Slytherin screamed back. "I'm terrified of the day I graduate and he calls on me to do those things. I can only hope I find the courage to end it before then!" He yelled. He stood up, and kicked his brother in the ribs for good measure.

Sirius spat blood on the ground next to him, cradling his ribs with a pained expression. He stared at the floor. If his brother really was a Death Eater, and he had confessed as much – maybe he was also telling the truth about Pete? It would make sense as to why Pete had been sneaking off so much the last few months.

"Why?" He asked again, coughing a bit. Regulus laid down beside him, placing a hand on his brother's cheek, which was cut and bruised from Regulus' outburst.

"Because I love you."

- X -

James wandered the castle for the tenth time, looking in every nook and cranny, in unused classrooms, in used classrooms, behind suits of armour, behind Ms Norris - yet still he couldn't find Severus. He'd asked Remus, but the werewolf was getting ready for the full moon and couldn't stay for long. He'd asked Lily, but she'd simply said she had no clue, and went back to writing her letter. He'd be damned if he'd forgiven Sirius enough to ask him if he'd seen the Slytherin, but even if he had, the boy had made his way out to the grounds a while previously.

He poked his head into the great hall for what felt like the millionth time, and was greeted with a couple of Hufflepuffs and a stray Gryffindor first year. Not a Slytherin in sight. It was nearing 8 o'clock, and he'd have to go down to see Remus relatively soon.

After so long enjoying Severus' company, and having had the boy confess he was fond of James' company, it felt strange to not have the Slytherin around. He'd been battling with a horrible empty feeling ever since the day in the grounds when Sirius and the imposter who was pretending to be him had attacked Severus. He'd spent hours pacing the dungeons, looking for the boy – trying to

apologise. But Severus wouldn't speak to him. He'd gone down to the work-room what felt like hundreds of times, but either Severus had mastered the art of camouflage, or he'd found somewhere new to hang out, and he was beginning to worry that this was the week Severus wouldn't make the Elixir for him.

When he found himself checking behind the stone gargoyles outside Dumbledore's office for the fourth time, he decided to give up, and opened his bag to bring out the invisibility cloak. He quickly checked no one was watching, then swung it over himself, quickly making his way out into the grounds. He could see the Womping Willow out of the corner of his right eye, and should have headed towards it to meet Remus, but out of the corner of his left eye he saw Sirius, looking pretty beaten up, with Regulus lying on the floor beside him. He instantly changed his course of action and ran over to the two of them.

"What the fuck happened?" He demanded, asking Regulus because Sirius looked too beat up to answer anything. The younger Black sibling refused to look James in the eyes.

"We fought." He admitted.

James rose an eyebrow.

"You two fought?" he asked for clarification. Regulus had a fat lip, but other than that, had barely a scratch on him. Sirius, however, looked like he'd been ran over by a bulldozer. Said bulldozer survivor gave a deep chuckle, then coughed, spluttering.

"Kid's a better fighter then he looks." He mumbled, turning his head so one side so that his face hit the ground and became covered in mud.

"You're telling me." James replied wistfully, giving his friend a once over to assess the damage, gently turning Sirius' body so his wounds were exposed. "I'm just going to clean you up a bit, then we'll help you get up to the Medical Wing, alright?"

Sirius nodded gingerly. James passed his cloak to Regulus.

"Hold that." He said, bringing out his wand and muttering some spells he'd learnt that should help his friend out. He grinned once he thought Sirius was healthy enough to walk, and helped the other Gryffindor stand up. They walked up to the castle and up all the flights of stairs to the fourth floor in silence, with Regulus trailing along behind them, and it was only when they got to just outside the Medical Wing, did James think to ask Sirius if while he was outside, had he happened to see Severus.

Sirius' eyes widened at the question and he broke away from James, running, albeit slowly, back the way they had come.

"Fuck James." He swore under his breath. "I've done a terrible thing."

James caught up easily and stopped Sirius from going any further.

"Calm down, you're hurt. Just stop freaking out and tell me what you did." He said, holding the boy up under his shoulders.

"James I..." He gulped. "Snape... He's going to Remus. He knows how to get there."

James laughed.

"Very funny, well... not really, but good try anyway." He chuckled. "How would Sev know?" He

asked, jokingly. Sirius grabbed a fistful of James' shirt.

"You have to believe me! I told him... Merlin... I told him." He bowed his head, weakening his grip on his friend's shirt. "James... I told him."

It took James all of half a second to register what Sirius had said, and he roughly pushed off the boy to run in the other direction. What had Sirius been thinking? He ran and ran, sliding down the barristers to speed up his trip. Would Snape really go? What had Sirius told him exactly? Had he said that Remus was a werewolf? If he had then Severus might have gone to further his research for Wolf's Bane, but if he hadn't... Severus would be taken completely by surprise. James shook his head, while running, even if Severus went thinking he knew what he was getting himself into, Remus was a werewolf, and reading about werewolves was completely different to being in the company of one.

Remus was sure to attack; he was lethal to humans. Remus couldn't help himself, it was impossible that he wouldn't attack. Severus was going to be attacked by a rabid werewolf. Severus was going to die... he shook his head again, rushing away those thoughts. He'd get there in time to stop anything like that.

He hoped he'd get there in time...

Reasons

Severus Snape stood, paralyzed, half way through the trap door to the Shrieking Shack, trying to figure out what was happening to him. He couldn't move a muscle, unless he alert the beast to his presence, and he could only watch in horror as the transformation continued. It all made sense now – the howls from the Shack well into the night every month, how sickly and testy the tallest, sandy-haired marauder would become with the lunar cycle. Severus held his breath as he took in the sight before him – the claws, the teeth, the scarred fur; crouching on all fours and keening in the pain of the transformation, it was both beautiful and terrifying. He wanted to slam the door closed, but he couldn't risk alerting the werewolf to his presence – he knew, of course, once the transformation was complete, it would be able to smell his human scent and would go for the kill – whether he wanted to or not.

That thing had once been Remus Lupin.

He'd got there just in time to see Remus withering on the floor in pain, howling in the moonlight, his metamorphosis beginning. He'd been so shocked that Lupin, of all people, was a werewolf, that at that point he hadn't thought to close the door. Surely, if he moved now, he'd have enough time? He hesitantly moved his arm, mere inches towards the clasps, and that was when Remus turned on him. He'd either seen the movement out of his peripheral vision, or he'd smelt Snape's human fear. It was awe-inspiring. Those bright golden eyes, staring him down, trying to figure out the best way to kill. Awesome, yes, but deadly.

This was it. He was going to die, at the hands of the Marauders. He knew it was his fate, the moment he'd laid eyes on those people. Those four boys stepping off the train at Hogsmeade station and laughing and joking their way towards the boats – they were relaxed and ready for their lives at Hogwarts. He'd been their opposite. While they'd been cosy up in Gryffindor tower, he'd had to suffer the cold damp nights down in the Slytherin dungeons. He'd come to school knowing more about the dark arts than any other student, a by-product of having parentage such as his, and Gryffindor-James and his rag-tag group of allies had instantly taken a disliking to him.

He closed his eyes. He'd never actually read about how werewolves killed their prey – perhaps it would be painless. Even as he thought it his mind conjured up images of wolves ripping their victims' limb from limb.

"Severus!"

He was knocked to the side by the head of a stag, the antlers managing to be spread far enough apart to not skewer him – although one gave him a rather nasty cut along his ribs. He managed to open his eyes to see an impressive stag wage war with the werewolf, pushing it back into the room, and slamming the door with its antlers. He wondered briefly if he had been attacked and this was a pain-induced vision he was experiencing, but then the stag transformed and a person stood in its wake, locking the door with some effort, considering the werewolf was attacking the door from the other side. Eventually, James slid down the wall, turning to Severus.

"Severus." He repeated, drawing in great breaths, so he could get enough air in the small area. Snape stared him down, hands shaking at his side.

"You... You tried to kill me." He stated, eyes wide with fear, as if only just realising what had gone down. He stood, though it was awkward to do so in the passage-way. James gulped, shaking his head, but Severus wasn't paying him any attention, only listening to the werewolf bang and scratch against the trap-door. At any moment that thing could barge its way through, then they'd both be dinner. He'd been sent into the lair of a werewolf by Sirius Black – surely James would have been in on the plan? "You tried to kill me." He repeated, angrier this time, voice more stable.

"Sev-"

"After everything I've done for you, this is how you repay me? I thought we..." The Slytherin gulped, dragging James forward by his school tie, and then pushing him away again, into the rough stone wall of the passage. James winced, putting a hand on the back of his head where it had connected with the wall. It came back with blood on the fingers. Severus deflated a little. "I thought we were friends, James."

James opened his eyes, which had closed on impact with the wall, and Severus could see they were swimming. He surveyed the blood on his hand, and then turned to the Slytherin.

"I want us to be. I want us to be more than that – you know that. Why would I try to kill you?"

Severus took in a few deep gulps of air, trying to calm down from the ordeal of witnessing Lupin turn into a werewolf. He slid down the wall on the opposite side to James and ran a hand through his lanky hair.

"I can't stand this anymore." He whispered.

- X -

The next day saw Remus sat in Dumbledore's office with Snape in the chair next to him. The sandy-haired boy had called the meeting the moment he was well enough to move from his bed in the hospital wing, and now he could look at nowhere but his lap. All he could remember from the night before was as he was transforming, seeing Severus Snape open the trap-door. He could have.... He bit down a lump of bile that was forming in his throat at the thought – he could have killed the Slytherin.

"I suppose there is nothing to be done." Dumbledore stated gravely. "I had hoped the Willow would have been enough, and for five years I suppose it did its job incredibly well – but I am sure you understand Remus, I cannot allow you to stay here knowing that another student's life could have been endangered by you."

Remus nodded, his palms splaying over the material of his school trousers and then clenching into fists. He had known it was too good to be true that he would be allowed to graduate from Hogwarts.

Snape stood from his chair next to him.

"It's not his fault." He defended. "I should never have gone looking-"

"No you should not have." Dumbledore interrupted, voice cold. He sighed, and then rearranged himself so he sounded kind again. "But you did, and I cannot allow a werewolf to transform on my school grounds if I cannot guarantee the safety of each and every student. The fact is you were able to find Mr. Lupin's location and as such-"

"But it isn't like I just 'found my way there!'" Severus replied shortly. "Black sent me there with specific instructions!"

A deathly silence fell into the room. Severus watched as Remus sent him a horrified, hurt look, and Dumbledore laced his long, aged fingers together contemplatively. The professor opened his mouth to reply, but at that moment the door to his office burst open to reveal the oldest Black sibling.

"Don't expel Remus! I'm the one that sent Snape there!" He confessed. Dumbledore turned his gaze to the newest edition to the room, and for once his eyes were devoid of all mischievous twinkles.

"Mr. Snape just informed me as such." He replied coolly. "What would possess you to do such a thing?"

Sirius deflated, seeing his friend sat in the chair, watching him carefully with his brow knotted together in shock and hurt. He shrugged his shoulders, shaking his head.

"I don't know." He finally admitted. "I just... it isn't Remus' fault – nor Snape's. I'm the only one that should be punished for this."

Dumbledore nodded his agreement.

"I hereby exclude you until we find a suitable way to punish this offence. You will finish the rest of your school year at home, and if Mr. Snape decides to take this further – then we shall have to expel you, and you will have to forfeit your wand." He explained. "Do I make myself clear?"

Sirius nodded, sending a brief look to Snape, who refused to catch his eye. Remus stood from his chair.

"How could you?" He asked, Sirius shook his head again, swallowing down the guilt.

"I'm so sorry, Moony."

Remus stepped back.

"Don't call me that." He snapped. "Only my friends can call me that."

X

"So you're really going, huh?"

Sirius shrugged.

"I don't have a choice mate." He said, looking at his best friend of five years. James had changed a lot since he'd become ill – he was skinnier and less confident in himself, but now he stood at his full height, having skipped class to come see Sirius off at the train station. "I'm sorry about everything I did to Snape." Sirius apologized. James huffed slightly, but shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't expect you to change your views on him just because I got a crush." He mumbled.

"So you do have a crush on him then." Sirius replied, trying to keep his tone light, even though the idea being vocalized kind of grossed him out. James flushed, like he hadn't realized he'd said it out loud, and then shrugged.

"It doesn't matter now." He responded. "Do me a favor will you? When you get home, flu my parents. Let them know that I might need them here this Friday."

Sirius' head snapped up.

"He wouldn't really not make the potion right? I mean, your contracts not been broken – it's me who's been a dick."

James shrugged.

"If he doesn't it's not because of you. Snape and I have our own issues to sort out." He lied.

The train's engine chugged into life, and James gave his friend a clap on the back in awkward support. Sirius turned to leave, but noticed Pete was hanging out to one side. He shot James a grin, and then ran up to Pete, dragging him off so they were out of earshot of the Chaser.

"What are you doing here?" He shot, angry. Pete recoiled, but shrugged.

"I'm here to see you off." He replied, but Sirius crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'm on to you Pettigrew. I know about your extracurricular activities!" He snarled. "I know you're a Death Eater."

Pete plastered a look of shock on to his face.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" He fired back, but Sirius just rolled his eyes.

"I can't prove it yet, but I promise you – one day I will." He threatened. "I will never trust you again. And I'll make sure Prongs and Moony don't either."

Pete tried to keep his façade of shock, but then his face morphed into a deep scowl.

"You have no idea what's coming for you." He replied, before morphing into his rat-form and scarpering away before Sirius could catch him. The boy kicked the ground angrily. He began to make his way back to the train, and had one foot on, one foot off the platform when the next visitor made themselves known with a swift slap across his cheek.

"If you get on that train I will never forgive you!"

Sirius smiled, despite the sting that had sprung up on his cheek.

"Lily." He said. The red-head burst into tears at her own name, and between sobs Sirius could make out the words 'don't leave' and 'how dare you'. He stepped back off the train and wrapped his arms around her. "I have to go Lily, but hopefully I'll be back. And this time... I want you to write to me. I want you to write to me at least once a week. I want to hear all your news; I want to know everything that's going on in your life. I want to see your curly handwriting."

Lily nodded, running her arm over her eyes to dry up your tears.

"You're a marauder." She told him. "You'll be back."

He smiled hesitantly at her, taking one last sweep over the train station. James offered him a little half wave, and Lily gave him a peck on the cheek as he boarded the Hogwarts Express to return back to London. He waved out the window at his friends – hoping one day he'd see them again.

Dependence

There was less than 48 hours between Sirius leaving the train station aboard the Hogwarts Express bound for London, at eleven am on Thursday morning, and eight o'clock on Friday evening, when James would find out whether Severus was going to undo their deal in the wake of almost being murdered by a marauder. The time was made impossibly longer by the sullen stares and furtive glances he was receiving from Remus – who had apparently made it his mission not to leave James' side in the run up to his immanent ultimatum. Lily was, of course, inseparable from him in the wake of Sirius' leaving, and James pondered on how at one time he would have been ecstatic at her company, and now he was only wishing she was Severus. The irony of her being willing to spend time with him only when he had finally moved on from his crush on her was not lost to him.

On Thursday evening he was summoned to Dumbledore's office. Sitting on his side of the headmaster's desk, he was able to truly look at the man in front of him for what felt like the first time; grey hair which had almost turned completely white; deep laughter lines, and even deeper frown lines; and worst of all - blue eyes with a noticeable lack of twinkle. When did Dumbledore get so... old?

The man placed his elbows on the table, entwined all ten of his fingers together and rested his chin on the bridge they made. James noticed the brown patches of aging freckles around the professor's knuckles. Dumbledore surveyed James over the top of his half-moon glasses, and while James was used to this action, he wasn't used to the uncanny stab of guilt that attacked him when he looked at the old man's tired eyes.

"James." The man said, his voice so low and breathless it struck a chord of sympathy within James the way only old people's exhausted voices often do. James looked up at him, trying his hardest to plaster on a brave face – sure this meeting was the confirmation of Severus' wishes for James to die by Cinis. He could only hope Sirius would be able to fly to his parents upon arrival at London, and allow them to be with him when he was consumed by the flames.

"Yes sir." He asked, ignoring how his own voice shook dangerously.

"Peter is gone." The old man said, James went to open his mouth, to ask what Dumbledore meant by that, but the headmaster held up a hand for silence, and James immediately obeyed. "He left this morning – and it is my belief that his parting was in order to join forces with the blood purist calling himself Voldemort."

James shivered - he knew it was stupid, but that name was cursed. He was eerily calm about the news he had just been given. He thought later he might scream and rage about it, if he had more time to think it through, but for now it was enough he registered that Peter was no longer with them – that he had betrayed their trust and was playing at being a Death Eater.

"Do you know where is he?" He asked.

Dumbledore crossed his desk and sat on the other side of it, so he was closer to James, and could survey the boy more closely. James held eye contact. Dumbledore sighed.

"I have reason to believe that he is under the care of two well-known supporters of Voldemort's cause – Rudolphus and Bellatrix Lestranger."

James shrugged his shoulders.

"If you know they're Death Eaters, why can't someone just go arrest them?"

Dumbledore placed an aged hand on James' shoulder, and gave a little half smile.

"I wish it were that simple my boy, but you will come to learn that a war is not won on the battlefield – and we must be patient if we wish to see victory in the future."

James felt suddenly as if crying was the best course of action to take. Hot, fat tears welled up in his eyes, and he brought his hands up to cover them. There was a lump in his throat that felt like a bludger, and he had to seriously fight the urge to sob.

"Great," He mumbled. "I want my mum."

- X -

The next day, James found himself in a position he knew all too well. The heat was creeping in. Before he had been sluggish in his thoughts that Friday would see his end, yet as morning came without the relief of a painkiller from Severus, he could barely move for the heat and the blatant fear. He tried to be brave, he was a Gryffindor after all, but the lack of a painkiller was enough proof he needed that he wouldn't see much past eight o'clock that evening.

His parents had arrived by half past five in the evening, having received word by Sirius. Euphemia cradled her son in his dorm, and Fleamont went to speak to the headmaster about what could be done. He arrived back in the dorm later, a stormy look on his face, having evidently had not much luck with Dumbledore.

James felt a hand on his forehead.

"You're burning up mate." Said Sirius' voice. "Too bad Snape doesn't think you're this hot."

He chuckled despite himself and the pain it caused him, then frowned.

"What are you doing here?"

Sirius grinned.

"I arrived with your parents, but this is the first time Euphemia's let you go enough for me to be able to see you. Not sure Dumbledore's too happy with me being back so soon, but I'm not going to leave you."

Fleamont was pacing in one corner, a book in his hand.

"What's he doing?" James asked his mother, gingerly pointing to his dad. Euphemia thinned her lips, tears in her eyes.

"He's researching how to make the Glacier Elixir – but I'm afraid he won't be successful – the

original maker never made his work public."

"We depended on Severus too much." James replied, coughing slightly.

"People are always saying 'only ever depend on yourself, and that way you won't be disappointed.'
- Yet, I feel if everyone lived by that philosophy, we'd be a very solitary race."

Everyone in the room looked towards the doorway, where Severus was stood, leaning against the frame. His hair was damp, and shoved back using the hairband James had bought him for Christmas, and he was clad in dark jeans and light grey turtle-neck. It was unusual to see Severus in anything other than robes, but it seemed he'd dressed up for the occasion.

"What are you doing here, if you're not going to save him?" Spat Fleamont, rushing towards the boy. Severus held up his hands in defence.

"Why does everyone assume I'm going to let him die?" He asked, pushing himself from the doorway. "I admit I didn't give him the painkiller this morning but to be honest anyone could have whipped up a batch of that, so I didn't think it would be such a big deal. Guess you really do depend on me." He said this last statement directly to James, having crossed the room to sit at the edge of his bed.

"So you're going to give him the potion?" Euphemia asked, rising from her position in hope. Severus shrugged.

"Of course. I just have to wait until eight." He said, as if this had been perfectly obvious all along. Sirius sat down heavily on the floor, puffing out a deep breath and looking up at Severus where he was perched on the end of James' bed.

"I am so sorry I tried to kill you." He mumbled. Snape rolled his eyes, then looked down at James.

"Dependence forms the very essence of our relationships with other people." He said. "Would you see someone hanging off the edge of a cliff, screaming for help, and simply leave them because they should have only depended on themselves in the first place? Of course you wouldn't. Whether you are running on adrenaline, or paralyzed with fear, we always find a way to help out our peers. Even if they were a total stranger. Even if they were an enemy... Our human hearts sympathise too easily. We question ourselves, asking; what would happen if I was in that situation? Would people leave me? Perhaps it's curiosity, perhaps it's an idle daydream, perhaps it's a sympathetic gesture. Or perhaps, it's that deep down we realise that the human race depends on each other.

"It could be argued that somewhere, hidden, there are entities - immortals or Gods, that are beyond the cycle of dependence. Maybe they laugh at us pitiful mortals, because they have the pleasure of being able to depend solely on themselves. It's an enviable image. However, the fact of the matter is - we are mere humans, and we do have to depend on others. Even if we were able to skim it down to the basics, we'd still depend on other animals for food, and those animals would have to depend on plants for nourishment. Those plants depend on the sun for photosynthesis, and that sun depends on the gravitational pull and the orbit of the universe to keep doing what it does best - being a giant ball of gas that radiates heat energy.

"Perhaps the universe is the route of this 'evil' called dependence, but no, even that universe might depend on the other universes around it. Maybe there is no source. There may be no starting point, telling us when dependence began. We could keep tracing it back to the very beginnings of time, when the future ends, and still we might never know. It's inevitable that we just accept that dependence is a part of us. No... is us. We're defined by our relationships with others, how we act with the people around us. Those actions are based off how much we depend on that person -

subconsciously. So, I feel justified to say that the immortal dependence is one and the same as us mortal humans."

He paused, sighed, and checked his watch.

"Just something to mull over." He said, bringing a small vile out his pocket. He pointed his wand at it and everyone watched as it grew into a sealed container of potion. He uncapped it, and checked his watch again. "Two minutes James." He said to the boy, who was finding it hard to keep his eyes open.

"Why?" The Chaser rasped out, whining pitifully at the intense heat.

"Because." Severus replied. "We're bound together. I depend on you as much as you depend on me. I don't know if this is love or not, but... If I let you die, who would I have to torture?"

James let out a pained laugh, and Severus checked his watch one more time before tipping the potion into the boy's open mouth.

- X -

Fleamont and Euphemia returned home early the next morning, have resigned themselves that having a chronically ill son would inevitably mean bouts of drama over whether he would survive. They bid him farewell, having had reassurances from Severus that he would not, any time soon, forget or forgo making James his weekly Elixir, and flew back to London with Sirius. James spent a day in bed recovering from the drama, catching up Remus, and their new-found friend Lily, on what had happened with Peter.

The next day, Sunday, found James wondering the halls of Hogwarts, a new found relish for life filling his heart. He smiled up at the gargoyles, grotesques and other statues that filled the ancient halls of the castle, and despite worrying he still had a whole year to go with two marauders down, he was feeling relatively optimistic.

"James."

He gulped, as Severus stalked towards him, dressed once more in muggle clothing that suited him much better than ill-fitting cloaks. This time he'd opted for a black shirt and charcoal slacks.

"I want you to know that as long as you keep to our arrangement – keep doing your orders, I will always make the Elixir for you."

James felt a peculiar swell in his chest upon hearing the words. He recalled the Slytherin's statement yesterday, that he didn't know if what he was feeling was love or not. Which meant there was a possibility that it might be. He felt giddy at the thought and couldn't stop himself from grinning.

"Okay." He replied.

Severus smirked, that same devilishly evil and sexy smirk that James had first noticed in Dumbledore's office the day he had found out he was ill. It made the boy feel weak at the knees.

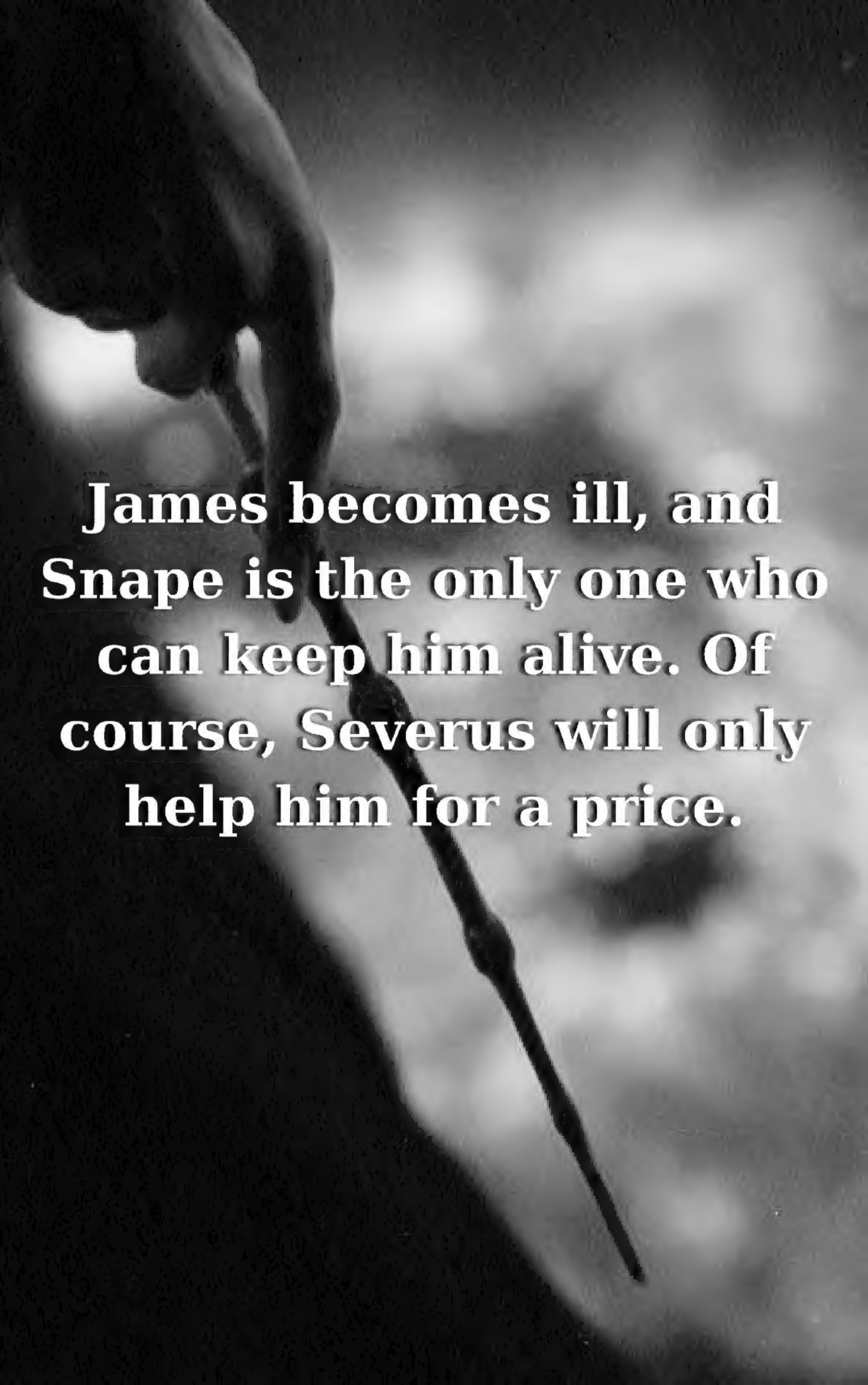
"Then I have an order for you." Stated the Slytherin. James held his breath in anticipation.

"Yes?" He asked, trying to make it sound like he didn't care.

Severus leant forward, holding the Gryffindor by the shoulders so he couldn't escape. He did a

quick check of the hall to make sure no other students were around, and when his checks came back that they were well and truly alone he leant forward even more so that their noses were almost touching, and whispered:

"Kiss me."

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a wand, with a cloudy sky in the background. The text is overlaid on the image.

**James becomes ill, and
Snape is the only one who
can keep him alive. Of
course, Severus will only
help him for a price.**